Physics Memorandum

To:    Jeff Roberts, Dean, College of Science

From: Andy Hirsch, Professor and Interim Department Head

Date:  November 27, 2013

Re:    The Department of Physics is seeking approval to change its name to the Department of Physics and Astronomy

Since the year 2000, the physics department has experienced substantial growth in terms of funding, student enrollment, and personnel, with 33 new faculty hires. During this time we have significantly increased our efforts in astrophysics, and now have 9 faculty in this area. The Purdue astrophysics group is well recognized internationally, particularly in the area of high energy astrophysics, and brings in considerable yearly funding. Purdue is a partner in several cutting edge research facilities, including the VERITAS gamma-ray telescope, the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, and the XENON dark matter project. With the recent addition of several new faculty, our department has increased its breadth in the areas of theoretical and computational astrophysics, as well as dark matter and galaxy evolution. We currently offer 5 undergraduate and 4 graduate astronomy courses (with an additional graduate course awaiting approval by the College), as well as an astronomy minor degree. The latter has seen 32 degrees awarded since 2008, and enrolment has been steadily increasing.

Given the success of our astrophysics program, earlier this year the department began formulating a proposal to change its name to the Dept. of Physics and Astronomy. The major motivations are:

1. More effective student recruiting at the graduate and undergraduate level.
2. Wider recognition of our department among peer institutions in astrophysics research, and inclusion in national rankings of astrophysics departments.
3. Broader departmental recognition among the Purdue community and the general public, for the purposes of alumni development and events such as space day, public lectures, and media contacts/interviews.
4. To recognize and build the popularity of our astronomy minor program and course offerings.

Changing our department name would bring Purdue in line with practices at major American research universities. Of the 50 top American research universities as listed by the Center for Measuring University Performance (2011), 46 have large astrophysics research programs, and 40 of these have either a ‘Dept. of Physics and Astronomy’, or two separate departments: one of physics and the other of astronomy. Among schools in the Big Ten conference, Purdue is the only one which solely has a “Dept. of Physics”. Purdue is internationally known for its strength in aeronautical engineering and astronautics, and adding astronomy to our department name would build on this important legacy. This will further increase the public profile of both the College of Science and the department.
In November 2013 we concluded our internal discussions and held a confidential ballot, in which a majority of the department faculty voted in favor of the new name. Thus we are seeking Dean, Provost, President, and Board of Trustee approval to become the Department of Physics and Astronomy.

Andrew S. Hirsch  
Professor and Interim Department Head of Physics

Jeffrey T. Roberts  
Frederick L. Hovde Dean of Science

Timothy D. Sands  
Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost  
Basil S. Turner Professor of Engineering

Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.  
President