

# **WSU DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY PROGRAM REVIEW**

## **Report of the Review Committee, March 29, 2012**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Program Review Committee (hereinafter referred to as “the committee”) for the Department of Geography received the Program Review document and guidelines for the review in early 2012. The committee made the site visit to the WSU campus on March 6, 2012. During this visit, the committee toured the facilities and met with faculty, staff, and students in the Department of Geography and with Dean Francis Harrold.

In general, the committee was very impressed with the highly skilled and productive faculty, several of whom are award winners and rated as master teachers. The instructional productivity, in terms of majors and student credit hours, for six regular faculty members is quite high and on the increase over the last few years. Faculty members are committed to the educational mission, taking great pride in their courses and the students that graduate in geography. Several faculty members are engaged in research, in addition to heavy teaching and service obligations. There is substantial potential for greater engagement of faculty and students with the community. The committee found that the vast majority of the geography students are satisfied with their education and prospects for the future. The students cited the willingness of faculty to provide formal and informal advising on courses and career opportunities. Students are satisfied with courses, but hope for more upper division class offerings and better facilities in the future.

The remainder of this report will elaborate on these general observations. The report is organized as follows: (I) Administrative Challenges; (II) Instructional Program and Curriculum; and (III) The Student experience. Each section attempts to concisely discuss the topic by focusing on the challenges and opportunities that the committee determined to be most relevant to the departmental chair, faculty, Dean Harrold and the university administration. Several of the topics necessarily overlap, requiring restating of the needs and suggested actions.

### **I. ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

#### **A. Leadership**

The Chair of the Department, Bryan Dorsey, is doing an outstanding job in his first year in this position. He has a particularly heavy teaching and advising schedule that should be altered to provide him with time to focus more on issues of departmental support and outreach. The chair should take his allocated course release time. As the number of students taking geography courses has increased along with the number of geography majors, the advising load has increased significantly. The job as the primary advisor to prospective and current geography students should be transferred from the chair to one of the other faculty, who should be compensated with one course release time for this important work. This will allow the Chair time to address the following:

- (1) Undertake a strategic planning process for the future direction of the department. This process and resulting plan will assist in making future decisions about curriculum and program development. The plan should provide a long-term strategy to guide the hiring of new faculty or replacing regular faculty and adjuncts.

(2) Work with institutional offices on the formulation of a comprehensive assessment plan, develop methods and collect data for purposes of assessment of student outcomes and program effectiveness.

(3) Foster external outreach, in part through social media initiatives, to parents, students, alumni and members of the community.

(4) Maintain and publicize a yearly teaching schedule for the students as far in advance as possible. Many students need to schedule school around jobs and family responsibilities and therefore require more advance notice of the scheduling of classes.

(5) Increase internal outreach throughout the institution to develop and maintain awareness of what the geography department offers, both to the students, and to other programs, such as the Community Involvement Center, Office of Undergraduate Research and other interdisciplinary initiatives across campus.

#### B. Administrative and Instructional Resources

It is obvious to the committee that the geography faculty could do so much more if they were provided greater institutional resources. In general, faculty members are willing to concentrate more effort into various instructional improvement areas, such as internships, assessment, community partnerships, interdisciplinary learning and technology, but resources to support their time and the costs of these engagement activities need to be increased.

(1) Efforts should be made to place faculty salaries on par with similar institutions throughout the country and to replace outgoing faculty. As a retirement in the department is forthcoming, the sixth geography faculty line must be maintained. Given the breadth of the teaching and service responsibilities of this growing department, it is essential that the department have at least six regular faculty members.

(2) The geography faculty are excited that original research might become more important in the College and at the WSU. If this is the future situation and research does become a greater part of the tenure and promotion evaluation, the institution should provide more financial support for professional research activity. Geography research often involves fieldwork, access to specialized data and computing resources and collaborative efforts. Geography faculty have done a good job of securing on-campus resources, such as Hemingway Foundation grants. An incentive system should be developed that provides both financial compensation and, even more important, release time to encourage and reward faculty research and acquisition of external funding.

(3) The faculty work very hard to create and maintain community connections through service and other types of community involvement so that they can offer high impact learning for their students. They do this through community-based learning, which includes field-based studies, interdisciplinary and collaborative courses, and on-line courses. In order to ensure that the students and the community benefit to the greatest extent from these initiatives, faculty members need institutional support. This can best come from financial incentives that could include release time, as well as stronger, centralized staff support.

(4) Departmental productivity would increase with additional clerical staff support. The departmental secretary is very capable, but only part-time. Stronger administrative support in the form of a full-time secretary would increase the efficiency of the chair and the faculty in allowing them to focus on their faculty duties. The students expressed a strong desire for a lab assistant for GIS courses and tutors for instructional support.

(5) Portions of the geography program in GIS and urban planning are highly dependent on state-of-the-art technology. It seems that there is no single computer lab room in geography that can accommodate an entire GIS class. Increased information-technology-staff support, current software, and increasingly powerful computers are needed to support these program initiatives.

### C. Space and Facilities

It is the understanding of the committee that the Social Science Building will be significantly remodeled in the near future. Given geography's needs, unique from other departments in the building, it is important that the geography faculty have the opportunity to work closely with the architect in planning the remodel.

(1) No good geography program should do without special facilities imperative to the adequate teaching of the wide range of topics associated with geographic research and study. An updated cartography/GIS lab is absolutely necessary. In addition, geography faculty should be consulted by building designers on features such as gas jets, sinks, and wet and dry lab areas in one or more classrooms. Since geography instruction and research utilizes geoscience field equipment, adequate, secure storage must be a part of the design for remodeled geography space.

(2) The geography students need to have one or more rooms to consult with adjunct faculty and to use as project rooms. These rooms would need desks, computers, and locked closets for equipment and supplies necessary for good classroom instruction. Also, students need to have a comfortable and inviting place to gather so they can consult with tutors and other like-minded students, learn about research and fieldwork opportunities, display their research, and most important, have a sense of place where they can interact as majors in the discipline. This is vital because many of them are nontraditional and commuter students.

## II. INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM AND CURRICULUM

The Department of Geography has many courses similar to other social science courses, but also has unique offerings in earth sciences, cartography, geographic information science (GIS) and professional urban planning. The department offers a solid liberal arts and sciences degree program in geography. In addition, the department has the unique expertise on campus to make the convergence of GIS and urban planning a primary focus of its instructional, research and student career programs.

### A. Interdisciplinary Community Involvement

The Department of Geography has an enhanced potential for interdisciplinary and community-based instructional and service programs. The integrative nature of the physical-human foci in geography and the geospatial information approach of GIS, is already substantial. It can be increased through recognition and incentives created for the extra effort and costs of developing and sustaining interdisciplinary and community-based instructional and service programs. Interdisciplinary problem solving and stakeholder participation is needed to address most of the major problems confronting our society; yet, the university system accounting for student credit hours (SCH) across departments, team teaching, and rewards for initiatives in the community is deficient. The Community Involvement Center, the Bachelor of Integrated Studies and the Office of Undergraduate Research appear to be existing organizations that could be used to support to a greater level of participation by the Geography Department in these instructional endeavors.

## B. Instructional Support

The committee determined that the fine teaching being done in the department could be enhanced by several actions.

(1) The technical and lab requirements of several geography courses require that funding be provided for teaching lab assistants to work with students during and outside of class time. This was the major concern expressed by GIS students. The creation of a tutoring support center, particularly for technically challenging classes, would improve the student experience and learning.

(2) Students expressed a desire for more and varied upper division classes. It would seem that these offerings can only be provided if some of the lower division (higher SCH) classes are reduced or more adjunct faculty are employed to teach the lower division classes. Either option involves a reallocation of resources that should be done in consultation with Dean Harrold.

(3) The lower division, general education, core courses, such as Geography 1000 and 1300, are the foundation for advanced courses. Students should have a consistent level of knowledge across the department after completing these courses (before moving on to more advanced classes). Also, these are the courses where geography majors are recruited, since many high school students come to the university not being aware of the opportunities a geography major may provide. For these reasons, we suggest that these courses provide a consistency of structure, content and standards across all sections of the particular course.

(4) The cadre of adjunct faculty in the department is a valuable asset to the department, as is the case in most 21<sup>st</sup>-century universities. Given enrollment trends and the demands on regular faculty, the number of adjunct faculty is likely to increase. The committee recommends that clearer policy and practices be developed in the review and support of adjunct faculty. We suggest that a formal yearly review be undertaken by the departmental chair based on course evaluations and interviews. In addition, steps should be taken to make the adjunct faculty feel like part of the geography team. This can be accomplished through financial incentives, engagement in departmental activities and providing them with a well equipped office.

## C. Outcomes Assessment

Evaluating the effectiveness of individual courses, the satisfaction of students with their courses and program, and the ultimate success of students in their careers are all emerging as vital issues. Based on the review, most geography faculty members recognize the importance of the outcomes assessment process. However, most do not feel knowledgeable regarding valid, effective methods. There is concern about the diversion of time and energy for these activities given the existing level of uncertainty at the college and university levels. The committee recommends that the university and college develop a standardized model for outcomes assessment for the College of Social Sciences that can be adapted to the geography program by the geography faculty. Furthermore, tabulation and interpretation of student performance results, student surveys, other measures of program performance, exit interviews and follow-up with alumni, all require significant time and effort to be done properly. Departments, especially small departments like geography, need expertise, staff and financial support to perform these evaluations in a complete and useful manner.

### III. STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The committee had the opportunity to interact with a group of geography majors (juniors and seniors) during a regular meeting of an upper-division research methods course. Many of the students self identified as “non-traditional” college students (older, married, working, parents, etc.). The discussion was candid and wide-ranging. Overall, the students are very pleased with their choice of geography as a major and with the education they have received. Communication between the faculty and students is open and effective. They are also very confident about their acquired skill sets and career prospects once they graduate. Several students indicated that they plan to attend graduate school immediately following their graduation from WSU.

Although the students indicated an overall satisfaction with the program, their comments did suggest that there is some work to be done with respect to building a stronger sense of community within the department. The review team makes the following observations and recommendations.

(1) There is a great need for a dedicated room where geography students could gather between classes to study or plan extracurricular activities, or to just “hang out.” A dedicated majors’ room is a proven tool in helping to build a sense of community within a department. The upcoming renovation of the Social Sciences Building provides the department an opportunity to organize its space in the future to include a majors’ room.

(2) With respect to extracurricular activities and student organizations, several students were unaware of the activities of the Geography Club – and the Geography Honorary (Gamma Theta Upsilon) appears to be inactive at present. These organizations are important to building a disciplinary community. The committee recommends that the department assign one or more faculty members to serve as advisors for these organizations with the purpose of facilitating (not planning or conducting) activities and providing year-to-year continuity.

(3) An active Geography Club/GTU could also help promote the visibility of the Geography Department on campus, another issued raised by the students. The students commented that the central advising center (Student Success Center) of the University is not particularly knowledgeable about the department or its degree programs. We recommend that the department chair, with assistance from other faculty, undertake an initiative to educate other departments/programs, especially those entities responsible for advising, about the Geography Department, its various degree programs and career opportunities.

(4) The lack of networking with recent department graduates was raised and it was suggested that a re-vitalized Geography Club could sponsor a Geography Career Day, in which recent graduates were invited to return to campus to share information about their career paths.

(5) Undergraduate research is widely recognized as a high-impact learning practice that promotes student retention and contributes to future success in graduate school and/or the work place. However, relatively few geography students appear to be involved in a substantial undergraduate research project or have received funding through the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR). Undergraduate research is obviously an institutional strength and relatively well-funded. We encourage the Geography faculty to consider how they might support and incorporate undergraduate researchers in their own research programs or scholarly activities.

Submitted by Geography Program Review Committee members:

George F. Hepner, Professor and Chair, Department of Geography, University of Utah  
(Committee Chair)

Gretchen Siegler, Professor of Anthropology, Division Chair of the Social Sciences,  
Westminster College

Richard Ford, Professor of Geosciences, Weber State University

Gregory Lewis, Professor of Asian and World History, Weber State University