

**Weber State University Department of Geography Program Review
Report March 19, 2017**

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Executive Summary

The review team composed of Dr. Michael Hernandez, Weber State University, Department of Geosciences, and Dr. George Hepner, University of Utah, Department of Geography performed a site visit to the Department on February 22, 2017. On this day, the team met with Dean Harrold, and Geography faculty, staff and students to discuss all aspects of the Department.

Based on this visit, the self-study document and other documentation, the review team developed several observations, evaluations and suggestions for the Department into the future. The Department has very strong faculty and departmental leadership functioning well in teaching, research and support of the university interdisciplinary mission. The Department has solid course and program learning assessment processes that substantiate the high quality of the instruction and student satisfaction with the outstanding faculty and courses. Furthermore, the course enrollments and number of majors is very much in line with trends in other CSBS departments at WSU.

The review team has concerns about the current and future faculty composition associated with student advising and instructional support in the Department. The reliance on adjunct faculty to replace three regular (out of six) faculty members who are devoting half of their FTE to the Honors Program, SPARC, and the CSBS Dean's office is a primary concern. It appears that the Department is provided funds to hire adjuncts and one full time instructor (1 year contract) to teach replacement courses, but this is insufficient to cover the loss of these full time regular faculty, who not only teach classes, but provide administrative, mentoring and program energy to the whole of the Department.

It is recommended that the Department hire a total of two teaching professionals on a three year contract, with yearly performance reviews, to cover the loss of faculty to administration in other units. This would cover the essential courses, and provide a more stable, longer term solution than hiring adjuncts on a course by course basis. This approach would foster the investment by the teaching professionals into their course development, program development and the learning community through mentoring and advising, involvement in student activities and outreach, and providing energy to departmental initiatives.

Other significant concerns involve the need for additional staff support for administration, student advising and technical laboratory and field course assistance. These needs are more critical with the diminished involvement of regular faculty mentioned above, and the new teaching classrooms and labs in the renovated building for the College.

The ratings and discussion below are in accordance with the Program Evaluation Worksheet format that provides for evaluation of each Standard using the specified elements.

Standard A -Mission Statement

- a Good
- b Good
- c Good
- d Good

The mission statement is clearly defined and includes expected outcomes for students that are in line with both the College of Social & Behavioral Science (CSBS) and Weber State University missions. The department curriculum supports its mission and is clearly defined for the different tracks for the geography major and for the geography teaching major.

Standard B -Curriculum

- a Good
- b Strength

Several courses in the Department of Geography are similar to other social science courses, but it does provide unique offerings in earth sciences, cartography, geographic information systems (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. One issue is that students are frustrated that several courses on the curriculum roster of courses are not offered or not offered in a timely manner.

- c Concern

The allocation of regular teaching faculty to other administrative positions on campus is hampering the allocation of sufficient teaching resources to classes and sufficient energy to program development.

- d Concern

This element is tied to element “c” in that the alignment of teaching faculty with course scheduling is made more difficult by the allocation of regular faculty to other campus duties.

The Department should be able to hire one or two teaching professionals on a three year contract with yearly performance reviews to cover the loss of faculty to administration in other units. This would cover the essential courses, and provide a more stable, longer term solution than hiring adjuncts on a course by course basis. This approach would foster the investment by the teaching professionals into departmental learning community through mentoring and advising, involvement in student activities and providing energy to departmental initiatives.

Standard C -Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

- a Strength
- b Good
- c Good

The department has five clearly defined and appropriate measurable learning outcomes that ensure students will have the essential knowledge, skills, and behaviors upon graduation. The learning outcomes are fully in line with the department goals defined in the mission statement. The learning outcomes are clearly linked to the curriculum as presented in the curriculum table in the self study (Standard B).

Evaluation of Effectiveness of the Assessment Process

- a Strength
- b Strength
- c Strength
- d Good
- e Good

The department is particularly strong in assessing both lower division general education courses and upper division majors courses. They have developed and implemented well-defined and appropriate set of measures through application of an assessment plan and matrix that effectively evaluate the standards of the discipline and the sciences on an annual basis. This includes one or more direct measures of learning and thresholds indicating successful performance. These are well-documented in the department's annual assessment reports (see self study for online link). The results from the previous five years show that learning outcomes have been met for the reviewed courses. What is particularly commendable is how the department full-time faculty have crafted a standardized set of topics and skills for instructors (full-time and adjunct) to deliver in the gen ed courses. This ensures all students are exposed to what faculty consider to be the standards of the discipline.

The department faculty review the assessment results regularly and make updates as needed. At monthly department meetings, faculty discuss current course assessments, current program offerings, and overall program performance. If needed, they decide on a course of action to correct any deficiencies at that time, ensuring quick resolution.

Standard D -Academic Advising

- a Good
- b Concern
- c Concern

The primary Department advising responsibility rests with the Chair. Students indicated that the Chair was very accessible and helpful for advising. The students stated that all of the faculty were receptive to advising them on courses, program organization and careers. However, this informal role of the faculty is less structured and more dependent on student initiative than would be the ideal. The concerns are related to the over dependency on the Chair for student advising, given his/her many other responsibilities, and the shortage of regular faculty over the next three years to supplement the Chair's role.

Standard E -Faculty

- a Strength
- b Concern
- c Good
- d Good
- e Good
- f Good
- g Good
- h Good

All full-time faculty are highly qualified with superior credentials and reputations as outstanding educators, researchers, and mentors with solid research publication records. All have earned a Ph.D. (terminal degree for geography). They consistently have outstanding student evaluations, ranging from 4 to 5 (out of 5) across criteria. Every single student we met with during the review noted how passionate faculty are about the discipline and student success. They said department faculty were genuinely concerned that students learn the value of a geographic education and its societal impact as well as doing whatever they could to help students succeed (e.g., co-curricular opportunities, discussions about the big picture, not just course work).

A major concern is three out of six tenure-track faculty have ½ time release from teaching that support college and university level appointments. While this is another commendable achievement as all three faculty have been recognized for their excellence to receive such positions, it has put undue pressure on the department to cover upper division courses along with other faculty responsibilities (advising, mentoring, service, etc.). The Provost's office has provided funds to hire a full-time instructor, but long term, this will strain the department and potentially affect the quality of student education. Temporary/adjunct faculty can't fill the diverse expertise or the mentoring through research component provided by the tenure-track faculty.

The six adjunct faculty have provided students with quality educational experiences. They all have earned Master's degrees and bring external professional and educational experiences that complement the full-time faculty.

Of the 6 full time faculty, one full time instructor, and 6 part time adjunct instructors, three of 13 are female, 12 are Euro_American ethnicity, one is Hispanic, and one is a veteran. The Department is concerned about adding diversity to the faculty.

Orientation for new/contract faculty is provided by the university Teaching and Learning Forum office. They host a multi-day orientation program off campus that provides excellent information about the university, benefits, and professional development.

Teaching of full-time faculty is systematically monitored and assessed through annual faculty review with the department chair and occasional classroom observations by other faculty to provide feedback. The department is discussing options to formalize teaching observations and other methods (e.g., review of teaching artifacts) for adjunct faculty.

Standard F –Program Support (Staff, Admin, Facilities, Equipment and Library)

- a Weakness
- b Good
- c Concern

The Department has one half time administrative assistant who handles budgetary, class scheduling, some student advising on course and program administration and all of the other tasks associated with a department. There are no staff persons to assist with the increasing burden of administration, to act as a professional student program advisor and to provide laboratory support to physical geography, GIS and urban planning courses.

It is understood that the proposed new building will have an additional GIS lab classroom and a classroom with a wet sink and other instruments for class demonstrations in physical geography space. The Department would benefit from a half time academic advisor to take over some of the duties of the Chair and the administrative assistant. Also, as the new building is finished, a half time lab-equipment technical support person is essential to help set up classroom demonstrations, provide assistance in labs, maintain and store equipment and supplies.

Along with the GIS lab and a functional physical geography classroom, lockable storage rooms and cabinets must be programmed into the new building. It would seem that the Department of Geography and the Department of Sociology & Anthropology could share the wet lab classroom, storage areas and the cost of the technical support staff.

Students indicated that a better and more current webpage for the department would provide advising information and knowledge of scholarships, internships and jobs in a more systematic manner. They felt that a better website and more social media presence would enhance the learning community and social environment of the Department.

Standard G -Relationships with External Communities

- a Strength
- b Good
- c n/a (no external advisory committee exists for the department)

The department and faculty are to be commended for having numerous formal relationships (23) with local, state, federal and NGO community partners across northern Utah and the Intermountain West, as well as international partnerships. These relationships provide unique opportunities for students to participate in internships and group projects in the fields of urban planning, geospatial technologies, sustainability, and the physical/cultural geography at multiple scales.

Faculty relationships with key individuals outside the institution have resulted in impactful presentations by dynamic speakers that have enhanced the understanding of critical issues across not only the Department but also the university community. In January 2017, the Department and CSBS sponsored well-known author, geographer and professor (University of Arizona) Diana Liverman to speak at Weber State on the role of social sciences in explaining the causes and consequences of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. In March 2017, as part of the Intermountain Sustainability Summit, the Department arranged for John Cook, the founder of Skeptical Science, a non-profit science education organization, to present a workshop on explaining and correcting myths regarding climate change.

Standard H -Results of Previous Reviews

a Good

The following comments are based on a comparison of this review with the program review conducted in 2012.

The Department has done an excellent job of extending the reach of the geography faculty into the WSU community. Faculty members are engaged in activities with several units on campus benefitting both the Department and WSU.

The faculty are doing a good job of attracting external funding for research and student support. These activities are enhancing links to the off-campus community.

Advising still reliant on the Chair and an informal process dependent on faculty knowledge and willingness to participate.

Only administrative assistant at 50% and no technician support leaving the Department without sufficient personnel infrastructure. The students are satisfied and appreciative of the efforts and dedication of the faculty to their educational mission. This has not changed from the 2012 review.