

Dean's Response to the Program Review of the Geography Program

April 26, 2017

I appreciate the work of the program review evaluation team (Dr. George Hepner and Dr. Michael Hernandez) in producing their report, and of the Department of Geography in compiling their self-study, and preparing a response to the review team's report.

The review team's report was overall a very positive one. It identified "good" to "strong" performance in a broad range of areas – mission statement, curriculum, student learning outcomes and assessment, academic advising, faculty qualifications and performance, program support, the numerous mutually-beneficial relationships with external communities, and notable success in securing external funding, as well as the department's responsiveness to its prior program review. I concur with the team's assessment of the department's many strengths. The Geography Department's dedicated faculty provide a fine education for their majors, and a strong component of a liberal education for their General Education students.

The report did cite several areas of concern. I will address these areas, as well as the department's responses to them.

Faculty:

Under three headings (Curriculum, Advising, and Faculty) the report expressed concern that three of the department's six tenured/tenure-track faculty have outside appointments -- as Associate Dean of the College, Director of the Honors Program, and Director of SPARC. These assignments each carry a two-course release per term, meaning that the department has six fewer courses per term taught by these faculty members, out of a total of 22 courses per term normally taught by its tenured/tenure-track faculty. This unusual situation represents a challenge for the department, to which the College, with the assistance of the Provost's Office, has responded with the hire of a full-time, non-tenure-track (year-to-year) faculty member, with a Ph.D., who has taught 5 courses per semester in 2016-17, leaving only one additional course per semester to be covered by adjunct faculty. This individual is also being assigned limited departmental service. This appointment will continue, year to year, while the outside assignments of the three tenured Geography faculty members continue. All three of them have three-year appointments in their extra-departmental assignments, so I expect to re-evaluate the overall situation during the 2018-19 academic year.

The review team's report recommends the hire of one or two full-time "teaching professionals" on 3-year contracts. Two full-time non-tenure-track hires (at the customary assignment of 5 courses per semester) would result in a teaching strength for the department of 26 courses per semester, compared to the normal total of 22 – in other words, four courses in excess of the normal departmental load for full-time faculty. The hire of one such individual is more appropriate.

The three-year appointment(s) for the temporary faculty recommended by the review team would deprive the College of needed flexibility: what if one, or more, of the three tenured faculty who have special assignments were to return to full-time status in the department before the three-year term of the temporary faculty member is up?

As noted above, one full-time faculty member has been provided for the duration of the present arrangement. The department's response indicates that much of their concern is mitigated by the present arrangement, noting that "...we are confident that our current courses are being covered more than adequately, despite the half-time positions for three of the faculty members."

Advising:

The review team reports notes that the department chair acts as the primary advisor for majors in the department. It states that there is an "over-dependency" on the chair for advising, given his other responsibilities. However, no evidence, such as input from students during their meeting with the review team, is presented to establish that advising in fact suffers from the current arrangement. Indeed, the review team notes that the students with whom they met praised the chair's accessibility to students. The department response notes that other faculty members besides the chair assist with student advising. The department adds that the College's two full-time advisors provide "significant advising assistance" to their students.

The review team report recommends the hire of a half-time advisor in the department. Such a hire would be out of line with advising resources elsewhere in the College. The College has two full-time academic advisors to serve all of its more than 2,600 undergraduate majors. And our second-largest major, Psychology, with over 600 majors, assigns one faculty member on a half-time basis as department advisor for majors. The half-time advisor recommended by the review team report would advise a far smaller number of students (according to Institutional Research, there were 71 Geography majors in 2016-17) than does the Psychology advisor.

Additional support personnel:

The review team's report recommends the addition of a half-time lab equipment-technical support position to the department. The department acknowledges that such a position would be of benefit, while noting that the College's full-time information technology specialist is of great help with the department's IT needs – and most of the department's equipment needs are IT-related, for its GIS and urban planning courses. I note that, since I have been dean, the department has not requested additional lab equipment-technical support beyond what the IT specialist currently provides. I will discuss this recommendation with the department, though college budgetary limitations will need to be kept in mind going forward.

Two other items are recommended by the review team: lockable storage rooms and cabinets in the renovated Lindquist Hall, which will be provided; and "a better and more current webpage for the department." In the Fall, I will direct the College's half-time marketing intern to work with the department chair to update and enhance the Geography web page.

I concur with the review team that the Geography program is a successful one, whose greatest asset is its faculty. The review team's report has identified many strengths and some concerns. I believe that some of these concerns are being adequately addressed, and I will work with the department to address the others.