

10 June, 1997

To: Dean Marsha Landolt, Graduate School
Dean John Simpson, College of Arts and Sciences
Dean Fred Campbell, Undergraduate Education

From: Review Committee for the UW Geography Department
Stevan Harrell, Anthropology, Chair
Shelly Lundberg, Economics
T.J. Pempel, JSIS
Susan Hanson, Geography, Clark University
Eric Sheppard, Geography, University of Minnesota



Re: Report of the Review Committee

The review committee was appointed by the deans at the beginning of May. The committee was presented with the department's Self Study, completed in 1996, with documents relating to the previous review of the department, completed in 1986, and with various other documents. We were also furnished with a large number of documents relating to curriculum and research, as well as with copies of the department's electronic newsletter and other materials.

The committee met with the respective deans prior to the site visit. On May 12 and 13, the site visit took place. We met with the departmental chairs on May 12 at breakfast, and over the next day and a half had a half-hour meeting with all but one faculty member who is in residence this year (Prof. Krumme chose not to meet with the committee). In addition, we met with a group of 13 honors and other undergraduate majors for about one hour and fifteen minutes, and with a group of about 15 M.A. and Ph.D. students for about two hours. We also had time to tour the department's laboratories and other facilities. At the end of the other meetings, we met again with the department chairs. Afterwards, we met in executive session to plan this report, and then met with the respective deans, first in the presence of the department chairs, and then, briefly, after the department chairs had left.

On the basis of the self-study, the other materials presented, and our interviews and meetings with department members, we present our findings here on four aspects of the department's programs: the state of the faculty, the undergraduate program, the graduate program, and the staffing and resource needs of the department.

STATE OF THE FACULTY

At the time of the previous external review eleven years ago, the Geography Department at the University of Washington was characterized, appropriately, as being in some trouble. Its reputation had declined from a peak achieved in the 1970s, the productivity of its faculty had slipped, its faculty had aged and had not been infused with new perspectives, and external funding for academic research was too low. The committee challenged the department to undertake a period of renewal and increased activity, with the goal of regaining national status (Report of the Ad Hoc Committee to the Graduate School, May 1, 1986).

Since the spring of 1986 six new assistant professors have been hired. Without exception, these faculty have been active, have brought new perspectives to the program, are publishing regularly, and in most cases extensively, and are gaining a national reputation for their work. The department has chosen to maintain its focus in the area of economic geography broadly construed, and has been able to strengthen this focus via the interests of recently hired faculty, social theory, migration, GIS, political geography, and political ecology. The new faculty have also brought substantial expertise in international development, in Latin America, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, three impressive new hires of permanent faculty have been made this year. These individuals are among the very best on the market this past year, will be regarded with some envy by other departments, and will continue to solidify the renewal of the faculty and enhance its diversity. In sum, these nine people have raised the reputation of the department and its faculty. We find that this goes a substantial way towards regaining the stature that was slipping away in the 1980s. Overall, the hiring record is a tribute to the imagination and ability of those faculty in the department to identify good people, hire them, and mentor them. This committee found the current mentoring program for junior faculty to be effective in this regard.

No clear consensus exists among current faculty about gaps in expertise that need to be filled, although individuals mentioned such areas as medical geography and quantitative economic geography. It is our judgment that past hiring strategies, which identify excellent individuals who can both bring cutting edge ideas into the department's core area of specialization and strengthen the skills of the faculty already in the department, have proven effective.

A faculty of 16-18 active FTE represents a reasonable size for a top flight geography program in the United States, and this department is moving towards this goal. Almost without exception, the faculty present since 1985 are all active scholars. The faculty have strong visibility in inter-disciplinary activities on campus. This is particularly important for a geography program in order to retain its academic reputation and attract undergraduate majors, because of the current lack of adequate exposure to geography as an academic discipline in

school curricula. The department also has a strong presence in the metropolitan area and the state, through outreach and consulting. This presence is a credit to the program and the university, and should be maintained, but individual faculty should not substitute outreach for scholarly research, adequately funded and published in the major organs of the discipline.

The level of research funding has increased significantly over the last ten years, but there is room for further improvement. The self-study stresses the importance of this, which we endorse. It is important to recognize that the extent and nature of funding opportunities varies dramatically in different areas of geography, and that expectations about external funding must be tailored to recognize these constraints. Expectations should be higher for faculty in areas where extensive research funds are available, and particularly for senior and better paid scholars in these areas. Junior faculty, particularly in areas where funding is scarce, should not place the raising of external funds ahead of the need to rapidly establish a record of published research, and all faculty should concentrate their search for funds in those areas that will best enable them to advance their scholarly record and reputation.

We were most impressed by the collective spirit of collegiality, cooperation and dedication within the department. The committee was unable to unearth any significant conflicts within the department. Faculty seem genuinely to respect one another, and are united in their loyalty to their colleagues and to the graduate and undergraduate programs, despite lack of resources, low salary, and overwork. This is often difficult to achieve in a discipline as diverse as Geography. Students and staff participated extensively and openly in the review, and reinforced the impression that this is an unusually cohesive program. This augurs well for the continued improvement of the Department's reputation and for the increasing prominence of its role in the social sciences at the UW.

Considerable credit for this must be given to recent chairs who have actively worked to gain the respect and commitment of the faculty. The self-survey is a model document, thoughtful, detailed and comprehensive, which also reflects the quality of the department. The discussion of initiatives in undergraduate education in this document demonstrates that the department is capable of taking initiative, and following it through.

The scholarly reputation, and commitment to instruction, scholarship and outreach of this faculty is scandalously under-rewarded. Mean nine-month full professor salaries are approximately \$20,000 lower than the mean for the top ten ranked geography departments nationally, and there is extreme salary compression. The review committee notes with particular concern that, in order to make competitive offers to talented new faculty and to retain current faculty approached by other departments, the newest faculty at the full and assistant

professor level are paid significantly more than their colleagues in rank. This is extreme at the full professor level, and at all levels can easily undermine the collective spirit praised above.

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

We conducted a thorough investigation of the department's undergraduate programs in interviews both with faculty and with undergraduates themselves, and through the examination of materials related to the curriculum. On the basis of this investigation, we find that the department's undergraduate programs are unusually strong, and that the department has undertaken some recent innovations that have made a strong program even stronger, and that it has maintained its high quality in spite of a considerable increase in the number of majors. We find that many of these innovations might well serve as models for other social science departments at the UW which are seeking to offer quality programs in an environment of increasing enrollments and stable resources. We offer assessments of these innovative programs, as well as a few minor suggestions that might further strengthen the program.

Innovations and their Reception

Several innovations in the undergraduate program have been undertaken:

1. Geography 397 and faculty mentoring: All students who declare geography as a major are required as soon as possible to take Geography 397, a one-credit seminar offered at least twice yearly, which introduces them to major aspects of the discipline, parades the faculty before them, and informs them about career possibilities with a degree in geography. As part of this seminar, students are required to choose a faculty mentor, with whom they meet at least twice to plan their progress in the major.

Students universally reported that the 397 course and the mentoring program were very successful in orienting them to their discipline, and affording them opportunities to pursue their education in a planned and rational way. The only reported problem was that students declaring their major late in their college career do not get 397 and mentoring soon enough; this is a structural problem for which we see no ready solution in the UW context.

2. Service learning and internships. Many department undergraduate courses now offer a service-learning component as an optional alternative to a term paper or exam. It is reported that about 30 to 40% of students exercise the service-learning option with a business, government, or non-governmental agency. Most of these experiences are extremely positive for students, and some students expressed a wish that the option were even more widely available. There are also full-scale internships available, some of them growing out of course-based service learning.

This service-learning program has received uniformly positive feedback. Our only suggestion is that the faculty be aware of opportunities to provide more internships, particularly in areas other than Geographic Information Systems.

3. Capstone courses. The department's recent institution of a capstone course or project requirement was seen as not particularly effective by the undergraduates who had gone through the experience. It was also perceived as unnecessary in a program where undergraduates are given good guidance and other individual learning opportunities.

Our recommendation here is that the capstone requirement be dropped as ineffective and unnecessary, and resources concentrated in other aspects of the undergraduate program.

The exportability of innovations in the undergraduate program. We were particularly impressed by the undergraduate reaction to the new design of the undergraduate curriculum, which really does seem to be going a long way toward providing students with the opportunity to plan their education in a way directly related to their intellectual interests and career goals, rather than simply concentrating on requirements and scheduling. We recommend that other departments be apprized of these changes with a strong suggestion that they consider implementing some version of them in their own curricula.

Suggestions for improvement

Despite our overall extremely positive evaluation of the undergraduate program, there were a few minor problems that we feel the department ought to address:

1. Sequencing of courses. It would be desirable if the department could design its more advanced undergraduate courses to take advantage of skills taught in its introductory courses, particularly in GIS. This would make the educational experience more cumulative.

2. Peer tutoring to reduce congestion. Some students and faculty expressed the opinion that help was not available in a timely enough manner in department laboratory classes, due to the large class size, the premium on lab space, and the workload of faculty and TAs. We recommend that the department consider implementing a program allowing advanced undergraduates to serve as peer tutors in introductory laboratory classes, compensating the tutors either with hourly wages or with credit hours.

Overall, our assessment of the undergraduate program is overwhelmingly positive, and we wish to congratulate the faculty on the outstanding job it has done in this area with limited resources.

GRADUATE PROGRAM

Since at least the 1950s the geography graduate programs at the University of Washington have enjoyed a distinguished reputation within the discipline. Our assessment of the current status of these programs suggests that this reputation is still well founded.

Our discussion with graduate students in the department was lively and on the whole very positive. UW geography still attracts superb students, competing with the other top ten programs in geography for the very best graduate students in the country.

Based on our conversation with the MA and Ph. D students and with individual faculty, we offer a few suggestions for how the department might improve on its already distinguished graduate programs:

1. Expand core course offerings: There seems to be a general acknowledgement among faculty and students alike that the current one-course core requirement is not sufficient to introduce students to the history of geographic thought and the important epistemological approaches within the discipline. We suggest that the department engage in the serious discussions necessary to decide how best to expand the core-course requirement. We suggest a two- or possibly three-quarter sequence that would be required of all graduate students except those who have already covered the material elsewhere. Possible foci for these core courses might be

History of geographic thought

Explanation in Geography

Frontiers in Geography (in which students would explore contemporary theoretical and methodological debates).

We understand that almost all students now take quantitative methods; we strongly support the proposed addition of a new course in qualitative methods, which we would suggest should also routinely be taken by all graduate students.

An additional and related point relating to graduate course work is the need for a wider variety of courses offered at the graduate level; this will become feasible with the arrival of new faculty members in the Fall of 1997.

2. Ensure early and consistent advising for incoming graduate students. In our meeting, graduate students expressed some dissatisfaction with the amount of direction and advising they had received when they entered the program. Although this seems to work itself out within a year or two, the Department might consider mechanisms for giving better advising during the initial adjustment period. These might include

Assigning each new graduate student to an advisor who will work with the student until he or she identifies a supervisory committee chair and a supervisory committee (which should occur no later than the end of the first year in residence). It should be clear to the student that selection of this "introductory advisor" involves absolutely no commitment on the part of the student for a long-term advising relationship, but this advisor will help the student negotiate the first few quarters of graduate study. This "no-commitment" advisor could be the same person (e.g. the graduate program coordinator) for every incoming student, or the advising could be distributed among faculty members.

Instituting a regular meeting of faculty advisors with each student at the end of the first and second years of study, to ensure that the student has direction and maintains momentum in the program.

3. Establish mechanisms to educate students about professional life. With the ever-tighter job market, students need preparation for building a career. Elements of this preparation include how to write a proposal, how to write a journal article, how to review a journal article, how to make an effective presentation, and how to be an effective teacher. Preparation for these aspects of professional life could take several forms, including

A course on proposal writing, such as the one recently taught by Lawson.

Weekly brown-bag discussions or afternoon seminars in which students can make presentations to peers in a less intimidating environment than that prevailing in the department colloquium.

Encouragement of jointly authored papers by faculty and graduate students.

Many of the professional skills noted above are valuable not only for those who will be pursuing academic careers, but also for those pursuing careers in government and business. The M.A. students expressed an explicit desire to have more internship opportunities open to them as a way of easing the transition from graduate school to professional life.

4. Provide consistent feedback to teaching assistants. This issue and other related issues have been raised in the report, "Review of policies regarding teaching assistants in the Department of Geography." At the moment students do not think that they receive adequate feedback from faculty on their teaching performance; especially since TA performance plays a role in the allocation of funding, it is essential to provide students with constructive, consistent, and timely feedback. In order to sort out TAs' contributions clearly for purposes of evaluation and feedback, faculty should also have their own teaching evaluated in every course in which a TA is also evaluated.

5. Seek academic placement of Ph.D.s in better-quality departments. A notable strength of the UW Ph.D. program is the large percentage of graduates who pursue non-academic careers. The UW department is a real leader in this area, and we are not suggesting that the department seek to place more of its Ph.D.s in academic settings. What we are suggesting is that the department make it a goal to place those Ph.D.s who do seek academic employment in better-quality geography programs. The department has already begun to do this, and we encourage this as a continuing goal.

In recent years, UW has sustained extremely high-quality graduate programs with relatively limited resources. With the modest expansion of faculty in the fall of 1997 the department has a real opportunity to improve the graduate programs even further by implementing some relatively minor changes.

RESOURCE AND STAFFING NEEDS

In this area as in others, the Department has done well with deficient resources. It is particularly noteworthy that very efficient communication has been established and maintained through the Department's e-mail networks, and that faculty and students alike feel well-informed about what is going on in the Department and in the discipline. Nevertheless, the resources are deficient, and the Department has many resource needs that must be addressed.

There is a general sense in the department that the support staff is overextended and that facilities are inadequate due to the expansion in the undergraduate program and the size of the faculty in recent years. The department has outlined needs in the areas of advising, office staff, technical support, and teaching assistants for education technology curriculum development, and additional resources in all of these support areas would be valuable. The highest-priority areas for increases in resources appear to be technical support and office staffing.

Technical support and computing labs: The substantial growth in the number of Geography majors and the extensive use of computing in undergraduate courses has led to scheduling problems in the computing labs and a need for greater technical support for the development of both instructional systems and research tools. The current LAN manager fills a 12-month, 50 percent GSA position, and is fully occupied in the maintenance of current department facilities rather than in initiating and providing technical support for innovations in the department's communications and computing capabilities. Reliance on a graduate student for this type of technical assistance limits the expertise and experience of available managers, and ensures relatively high turnover with its attendant learning costs. Replacement of the GSA position with a permanent staff position would provide more professional and consistent support and reduce some of the supervisory burden on the Administrator.

Office staff: Staffing levels are again approaching previous levels, after cutbacks in recent years, but are still regarded as inadequate. The Administrator, who is currently filling a 75 percent position, is responsible for administering the increasing numbers of funded research projects as well as other duties. The assistant to the chair

plays a valuable role in advising and in administrative coordination, but his schedule seems to be quite full already. The greater emphasis on pursuing outside funding opportunities and the imminent arrival of three new faculty members are expected to substantially increase this already heavy administrative burden. The other staff--a full-time graduate program assistant and a half-time office assistant--are unable to take on additional responsibilities in budgeting, and the department already makes extensive use of work-study students for routine office tasks. An additional part-time office assistant, or a restoration of the Administrator's position to 100 percent would improve support for faculty pursuing or undertaking funded projects. The burden on existing staff could also be reduced by innovations in administrative procedures at the College level. Improved access to central administration databases could replace staff time spent inputting and maintaining parallel department records.

In our assessment the programs and the spirit of the department are both very strong, but they are also under considerable stress from elevated expectations combined with declining support and rewards. This means that even though the department is strong and getting stronger, it is still vulnerable as long as expectations remain at their present high level and resources remain relatively meager. The administration of the college and the university must take responsibility to close the gap between expectations and support, if it wishes this department to work together to continue its established track record of improvement and growth. They must avoid the temptation to assume that past growth can be repeated by simply asking more of the department, and exercise leadership to structure incentives in such a way as to achieve some balance between materially recognizing the achievements of the first half of this decade while challenging the department to build further on this.