

March 5, 2008

To: Dean Suzanne Ortega, Graduate School
Associate Dean Melissa A. Austin, Graduate School
Interim Dean Ronald S. Irving, College of Arts and Sciences
Divisional Dean Judith A. Howard, Social Sciences
Associate Dean John D. Sahr, Undergraduate Academic Affairs

From: Department of Geography Review Committee
Ann S. Anagnost, Anthropology
Nikhil Pal Singh, History
Janice Jones Monk, University of Arizona
Jamie Peck, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Joel S. Migdal, International Studies, Chair

Re: Review of the Department of Geography

The review committee was constituted in fall, 2007, to conduct the 10-year review of the Department of Geography and its three degree programs. The specific charge asked for recommendations from the committee regarding the continuation of each of those programs—the Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy.

In order to undertake our assessment, we held multiple meetings with deans, faculty, staff, and students, and we solicited input from alumni and friends of the department. The first meeting took place on December 4, 2007. We were joined by the relevant University administrators. Jan Monk and Jamie Peck participated by phone. On January 22, 2008, Ann Anagnost, Nikhil Singh, and Joel Migdal met department chair, Bill Beyers; assistant to the chair, Rick Roth; and department administrator, Sue Bernhardt. Those interviews were very valuable in helping the committee establish its lines of inquiry, especially the conversations with Beyers and Roth (Bernhardt is still fairly new to the department and, naturally, did not have the long-time perspective held by the other two). Migdal conveyed the key issues coming out of that meeting to Monk and Peck, as well.

The site visit by the committee took place on January 28-29, 2008, preceded by a committee dinner the evening of January 27. During the site visit, the committee met with individual faculty members, as well as small groups of faculty members; department chair, Bill Beyers; graduate program director, Michael Brown; a group of M.A. and Ph.D. students; a group of undergraduates; and a group of departmental staff members. Incoming chair, Katharyne Mitchell, and faculty member, Matt Sparke, spoke to us by telephone from Rome, where they were leading a student group.

The committee participated in an exit interview, as well, which included University administrators and Beyers, who responded to issues raised by the committee, followed by an exit meeting with University administrators only. Committee members also toured the department's space and facilities. Additionally, the committee reviewed many documents. Among them were the previous review committee report from 10 years ago, the department response to that report, and the department's recent self-study. Finally, the committee met at the end of the site visit and subsequently continued to consult via email.

Based on its thorough review, the review committee enthusiastically recommends the continuing status of each of the programs, with a subsequent review in 10 years.

In the remainder of this report, we will assess the overall "health" of the Department, as requested in the charge letter to the committee from Dean Suzanne Ortega and Associate Dean Melissa Austin, and offer some advice as to how the state of what we regard as an already "healthy" department might be further improved. We have paid special attention to the four questions posed to us at the beginning of the process:

1. Are they doing what they should be doing?
2. Are they doing it well?
3. How can they do things better?
4. How could the University assist them?

Our answers to the first two questions are straightforward: yes, they are doing what they should be doing, and they are doing it quite well. We will elaborate many of the department's extraordinary strengths in the next section of the report. Following that section, we will delve into questions 3 and 4: how can the department improve itself and what the University might do to facilitate such improvement. Finally, we will offer several recommendations for future action.

A Department with Internationally Recognized Strengths

The University of Washington's Department of Geography is one with admirably high national and international visibility. It has a first-class faculty, particularly in terms of faculty members' collective and individual research reputations. Historically, the department exerted a significant impact on the trajectory of the discipline of geography, particularly in the wake of the "quantitative revolution" of the 1960s. A major achievement of the last decade is that this formidable reputation for field-shaping theoretical and methodological innovation is again acknowledged, albeit across a range of new areas of the discipline.

Much of the department's success derives from excellent new hires from very good, visible programs. Since its last review, the department has done extremely well in recruiting faculty members who quickly gained broad recognition for their research and service to the

discipline. It appears to have been well-served by a policy of structuring its searches around broad and diverse areas of faculty interest with an eye to hiring the “best person.” It has had an excellent track record in retaining faculty, which speaks to how good practically all the faculty members feel about the department, even as they embrace a diversity of methods and ways of thinking. The research productivity of the entire faculty has been very high, including the new hires. Several members have achieved recognition as being among the most influential researchers in the discipline. In short, the department has recruited very wisely at the assistant professor level over the past decade, which has translated into an impressive cohort of young full professors and associates. The faculty consists of people who others in geography around the country and across the globe feel they must read in order to understand the field. This strength as a research faculty bodes well, not only for its ability to influence future research in the field, but also for the future leadership of the department and for its visibility both on campus and across the discipline.

The department’s visibility nationally and internationally has been enhanced by a number of faculty members who have offered very high service to the discipline, among them, Vicky Lawson, who served as the president of the Association of American Geographers, the principal professional organization among geographers. Others have provided extraordinary service to the University of Washington, including J.W. Harrington, as UW legislative representative, and, among others, Katharyne Mitchell, as Simpson Center Professor for the Public Humanities, Matthew Sparke, Vicky Lawson, and Craig ZumBrunnen (especially through the IGERT he earned). Indeed, we noted that almost all the faculty have considerable national and/or international service as journal editors, editorial board members, and leadership in AAG Specialty Groups and/or elected offices. Michael Brown and Kam Wing Chan, for example, have served as editors of international journals; and Kim England was the elected chair of the AAG Honors Awards Committee. A number of faculty members have provided high-visibility and valuable service to the community. Among them, Bill Beyers stands out for his work on a series of community projects, spanning many years.

Within the faculty, a climate of collegiality prevails. Indeed, from our discussions with faculty, we can say that collegiality is an explicit and highly valued feature of the department. Overall, faculty morale is high, and the mood of the faculty is positive. A strength has been the value placed on the practice of coming to decisions by consensus, which is essential to a relatively small department. In a discipline that has experienced many innovations in methodology and substantive changes in areas of inquiry, a respect for diversity of approaches prevails among the faculty; indeed, we witnessed genuine mutual respect among those from very divergent sub-fields.

One of the distinctive features of the department is the absence of the sub-field of physical geography and a concentration instead on the social science facets of the discipline. Among these human geographers, we found a healthy mix of quantitative, qualitative, and technical approaches, with some key members playing a bridging role among approaches (the fairly recent hire of Sarah Elwood-Faustino has been important in this regard). In short, the department successfully maintains a plurality of methodological approaches and advances

scholarship and teaching oriented towards qualitative, quantitative, and technical areas of the discipline.

The department has succeeded in attracting impressive numbers of applications for the graduate program. These are noteworthy because of the consistently high quality of the student applicants.

The number of undergraduate majors is towards the higher end when compared to peer departments of comparable faculty size around the country. A common challenge faced by geography departments generally is that students have limited prior exposure to the discipline, since geography is not well represented in many U.S. high schools, though there is evidence of change in some states with recent rapid expansion of AP courses in the discipline. This lack of familiarity with the discipline can present a challenge in attracting majors (or the right majors), many of whom also declare relatively late.

The Department has been an innovator in the domain of undergraduate teaching at the University of Washington by using an approach that combines compiling student portfolios (working with UW SOUL), and establishing well-defined learning objectives for each course. Within the department's curriculum, GEOG 315 stands out as a course that integrates many aspects of the major for students, while GEOG 123 has made the department more visible and represents an important contribution to general education within the wider university, as well as a potential gateway to the geography major. Overall, undergraduate morale appears to be high. There is substantial demand for GIS instruction among the undergraduate community at the UW, reflecting both the intrinsic appeal of this emerging field and its instrumental value in the regional and national labor markets. The department is seeking new ways to manage this demand for GIS in the context of its broader commitments to an integrated and expansive geographic education.

Generally well run, the department did have an administrative problem several years ago and solved it satisfactorily. Since the last review, the department has added a senior computer specialist, which has been very important to its smooth functioning. However, as will be noted below, the technologically intensive nature of some instruction in the department, especially students working with GIS, has made it important to increase technical support even more.

The Department of Geography is well placed to play an important role in current interdisciplinary initiatives at the UW and in the College of Arts and Sciences. Indeed, the department's synergies with the proposed College of the Environment and the new Department of Global Health, both of which the University has earmarked as high priorities and central to its mission, means that small increases of resources in these fields in the Geography Department will also be very valuable to the UW as a whole.

Related to this point, we noted broad faculty support for the proposal that the next department hire should be in nature-and-society/political ecology, an area of particular dynamism and expanding interest within the discipline and, more generally, in society. This sub-

field is currently underrepresented within the department and could supplement the environmental work of Craig ZumBrunnen, both in the urban ecology IGERT and on environmental policies and management in the Soviet Union/Russia, and of Jonathan Mayer in his environmentally-related health geography research. Given that there is an orientation to the use of mixed methods research in the nature-and-society/political ecology field, it is possible that such a hire could come with additional technical expertise in GIS or remote sensing, another area of expanding interest in the discipline and of high student demand in the department. Such a hire could thus have a dual bridging function—within the department as well as linking to the new College of Environment and, possibly, Department of Global Health initiatives.

In sum, the department demonstrates great strengths. First and foremost is the quality of the faculty and its members' capacity to work well with each other. Additionally, the faculty's capacity to contribute to the major UW themes of health, environment, and international studies place the department at an important juncture in the University and College structure. Also, the department runs well administratively, and it attracts respectable numbers of undergraduate majors and high-quality graduate applicants. The attention that the department has put into undergraduate education through curricular reform and attention to the cumulative student experience has paid off handsomely.

Challenges That the Department Faces

The Undergraduate Program

Several faculty noted a tension between the tendency for a disproportionate share of undergraduates to self-identify with the GIS components of the curriculum and the broader range and reach of both course offerings and faculty expertise (only two faculty members concentrate in GIS). While acknowledging the understandable appeal of the GIS identifier and the strength of programming in this area, some faculty were concerned that there was a growing imperative to achieve a closer alignment between the collective identity of the undergraduate body and the more expansive mission of the teaching program. Certainly, students did express a strong interest in GIS to us, although a number of them also talked about how their experience in the department led them to a greater appreciation of human geography and to see GIS as a tool to explore other parts of the field, rather than as an end in itself. Indeed, several cited GEOG 315 as a course that helped them understand the diverse interconnections between all aspects of the discipline of geography. It may be that potentially diverse pathways through the major are not as clearly signposted to students as they could be and the cross-over between GIS and the interests of most of the faculty need to be made clearer. Although a capstone course has been considered by the department in the past (and definitely presents logistical problems), it is also possible that some such course offering, in addition to Geography 315, could enable students to develop a more integrated understanding of geography as a discipline.

Geography 315 was noted by a number of students as a key course in the curriculum. At the moment, one faculty member has shouldered most of the burden of delivering this important class, with a graduate student teaching a second section of the course. Given its centrality to the undergraduates' experience in the major, the department faces the challenge of ensuring that the course is staffed appropriately, while meeting broader departmental objectives.

The Graduate Program

While, as noted above, the department attracts an extremely high-quality applicant pool, commensurate with the status and visibility of its faculty, there is a clear concern that the quality of funding packages, in particular, can often be an obstacle in competing for the very best students. It is fair to say, however, that there is not a consensus among the faculty concerning either the depth or the ultimate cause of this problem. Given the chronic shortage of funds for graduate support, both in the department and in the University as a whole, assembling competitive offers for top-flight graduate students remains a major challenge for the Department of Geography. Insufficient graduate funding makes it difficult to make competitive offers in recruiting top applicants to the graduate program.

It is a virtue that the graduate program serves a broad array of career trajectories, ranging from the private sector through placement in government and NGOs to academic positions. A continuing challenge for the department is to place students intending to pursue academic careers in top peer research departments in geography in North America—placements commensurate with the national and international profile of the faculty. Ongoing attention will need to be paid to recruiting the best geography students through competitive funding packages and to supporting strong placements.

During their graduate careers, the department's students noted some difficulties in establishing committees. However, the greater concern for them was a lack of involvement on the part of faculty in creating an intellectual community for the graduate program as a whole. To some extent, the students' feelings are a result of having dynamic faculty members who are successful in securing research leaves and/or funding that periodically take them away from teaching. Graduate students have been delegated the responsibility for coordinating the departmental colloquium, but faculty attendance is reportedly not always strong, nor does there appear to be broad faculty participation at departmental coffee hours.

A faculty concern about the graduate program was that there needed to be a more rigorous application of core requirements. Too many exemptions were being granted by faculty for requirements, such as the methods course requirement, sometimes on an ad hoc basis. The faculty needs to review the graduate program requirements and ensure that everyone is on the same page with regard to what are allowable exemptions, particularly because there have been recent recruitments.

The review committee did not gain a clear sense for how the MA program articulates within the larger structure of the graduate program. Given that there are good career tracks for students who earn a terminal degree at the MA level, a challenge for the faculty will be how to best serve these students, who do not intend to pursue the Ph.D.

A related challenge for the faculty involves career mentoring, both for students earning terminal MAs and for those going on to the Ph.D. Statistics in the self-study pointed to lower student satisfaction with career mentoring among the students in the department than the College norm in the last several years.

The overall challenge for the faculty will be to create among faculty members a common sense of purpose in, and involvement with, the graduate program. At the moment, too much of the burden falls on the graduate advisor, who is already dealing with much of the tremendous effort that goes into admissions. For this person to do the bulk of advising, as well, seems unrealistic. There is a sense in which the more “developmental” aspects of graduate program governance are not receiving the attention that they deserve. The department may need to investigate ways to broaden the commitment to servicing the graduate program, beyond the rather narrowly circumscribed set of functions that are presently emphasized. While advisor-advisee relationships at advanced levels appear to be almost universally strong and are highly valued on both sides, the commitment to more “generic” forms of advising and support, especially for incoming students, is much less developed. On the positive side, this can be argued to foster independence and self-reliance among the graduate student community, though there may be some who fall through the cracks. The department’s long tradition of valuing intellectual autonomy may inadvertently generate a “sink or swim” culture in some instances.

The Faculty

Some turnover in faculty through retirement can be anticipated in the next few years, which will demand important decisions on the direction the department will take. Complicating these decisions will be significant changes in the University that could affect the department, especially the growth anticipated in the new programs in environment and global health. Navigating these waters will take leadership and a strong sense of purpose and direction—more than can be provided by the chair alone. The high level of collegiality among the faculty in personal interactions needs to be translated into collective activism and leadership, so that the department can maximize opportunities in a rapidly changing landscape. The faculty—a number, as noted, newly hired in the department during the last decade—will face the challenge of creating a sense of common endeavor. The chair needs to be able to call upon the coordinated activism of the faculty—relatively small in size in the social sciences at the University—to pursue the department’s best interests in a proactive fashion. In part, the challenge is for the faculty to go beyond the admirable quality of mutual respect to the creation of a rejuvenated and refocused sense of intellectual community in the department. Such a community should carry

over to the graduate students, as well. That community can be the foundation of a collective action and strong collective leadership.

The Challenge of Diversity

The faculty and graduate students reflect significant gender and sexual orientation diversity. There is no gainsaying the fact there is a relative lack of racial and ethnic diversity, particularly among the faculty and graduate students. In part, this is an issue that may pertain to geography as a discipline. It should also be noted that the teaching and research interests of the faculty indicate a strong commitment to issues of diversity and equity in all forms and that the department has given considerable thought to its own internal composition. As yet, however, this thinking has not yielded active planning or definite commitment to addressing the issue, particularly in faculty hiring.

Recommendations

- A faculty committee should be created to oversee the graduate program. Such a committee might begin with a task force charged with reviewing the program, leading later to a standing committee. The mission of the committee would be to strengthen the overall functioning and integrity of the program. The entire graduate program is in need of a top-to-bottom review, including recruiting, orientation, initial advising, placement, progression(s) through the program, thesis and research supervision, career counseling, grant preparation, and mentoring. The current graduate committee is primarily an admissions committee and bears the enormous bureaucratic burdens of conforming the graduate program to university requirements. Given the challenges facing the graduate program, the department has an evident need for a standing or ad-hoc committee that can undertake a fundamental review of its admissions and funding policies, course requirements and graduate advising needs, student morale, and department culture. It could work to ensure that all faculty and particularly new faculty are socialized into a common understanding of program requirements and provide recourse for graduate advising needs that are not being met.
- Additionally, the department as a whole should address less concrete issues within the graduate program. In particular, the department should take steps to augment and strengthen the sense of intellectual community within the graduate program. Creating

such an environment will involve more ongoing involvement of all faculty members with graduate students, beyond their own advisees.

- The department should also address the issue of graduate student funding. This might be accomplished through the above-mentioned graduate committee or by a sub-committee of it. In any case, the department needs to create a faculty group charged with reviewing funding packages with an eye to more competitive graduate recruitment. While there is some disagreement among the faculty over offering up to five-year packages to the most attractive candidates (at the risk of diminished resources for other students), other departments in the social sciences have increasingly moved towards offering such packages. The experiences of departments such as history and political science should be examined carefully to see if they offer viable models for the Department of Geography.
- The issue of funding and recruiting the best possible graduate students is one that extends beyond the Department of Geography to the entire College of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School. We strongly recommend to the College and Graduate School deans that a task force be established to address the issue of graduate funding across units, particularly for developing the best recruitment packages possible, given the limitations in available funds.
- A review of the Masters program may also need a special committee or sub-committee. In particular, the department should address the two different constituencies populating the Masters program, those aspiring to go on to the Ph.D. and those seeking a professional, terminal masters degree. The department needs to consider a variety of options, including the creation of two tracks that could best serve the diverse constituencies in the program.
- The department is well situated to contribute substantially to the three foci of future development at the UW: environment, global health, and international studies. It should develop a proactive orientation and willingness to embrace changes that will be forthcoming at the University. Success in these endeavors will depend on (a) strong leadership in the department and (b) obtaining new positions in the fields of nature-and-society and global health. The combination of leadership and obtaining positions that will position the department well, not only with the discipline of geography but within the changing landscape of the University of Washington, may be especially pressing if any upcoming retirements affect the department's existing strengths in environmental and health studies. Hiring opportunities for the department can serve as important means to build interdisciplinary linkages as well as opportunities for possibly hiring a scholar in a cognate field with a good fit for the department. The department, as it is currently constituted, is somewhat unusual for geography departments in having all its faculty

members holding geography Ph.D's. Possible opportunities for adding faculty, especially in times when new lines are extremely difficult to come by in the College of Arts and Sciences, may come through cross-disciplinary and cross-college cooperation, involving hires in cognate fields with strong connections to the discipline. Identifying and exploiting such opportunities will demand more than the leadership of the chair; it will need to call upon the coordinated leadership of a core group of faculty. It seems unlikely that an opportunistic approach will suffice in this respect. The department will need to develop, and prosecute, a proactive strategy.

- As its first priority in hiring, the department has achieved some consensus around a position in nature-and-society/political ecology. We concur; the position would strengthen the department within the discipline and would position it well for the impending changes at the University of Washington. We strongly recommend to the College of Arts and Sciences that it support the creation of a position in this area in the Department of Geography. While it is always important not to overburden a position with too many requirements, finding a candidate who can bridge the substantive aspects of such a position with technical expertise, such as remote sensing and GIS, would fill several gaps and enhance the overall integration of the department. Of course, it is not always possible to maximize every aspiration in a single hire, and a more qualitatively oriented scholar should not at all be ruled out.
- The department should redouble its efforts involving diversity in the recruitment of both graduate students and faculty. The faculty needs to make priorities, develop a plan, and take responsibility for closing the gap between its aspiration and what it has achieved to date in this domain, especially in relation to graduate student recruitment. In terms of faculty recruitment, leadership of the chair and a core group of faculty, once again, will be crucial for identifying areas of intellectual inquiry within the discipline as well as possible partnerships or joint appointments with other units on campus that might yield diverse applicants for faculty positions in the department.
- Development and fundraising have not been strong suits of the department. The current environment at the UW, especially with limited state support, demands more sustained attention to development. The chair and faculty must work closely with the assigned person in the college to develop an overall plan for development. Multiple senior faculty members must be involved in this effort on an ongoing basis, and the department has to operationalize its development plan. There appears to be unexplored potential in the department's substantial alumni list.
- As mentioned, the department is now running smoothly on the administrative side. But there are dangerous signs of stretching the existing staff too thin. The technical needs of

the department, particularly because of the increased student demand for GIS and expansion in the quantity of equipment needing maintenance, are now being met by a single technical specialist, who ends up taking hours of extra work home with her each night. Even with the recent substantial grant by the Student Technology Committee to upgrade hardware and software, there is a pressing need for the University to provide an additional half-time person to work on day-to-day technical support.

- Undergraduate advising is a strength of the department, although here, too, the existing staff is overstretched. The University could help the department (and other departments) immeasurably by providing searchable student databases and interactive advising bases. These would lead to improved student advising and much better career counseling for undergraduates.
- The department should establish an internal peer tutoring system.
- In light of the “identity” issues that have arisen around the undergraduate program, involving the disjuncture between the interest in students in GIS and the research/teaching orientation of the overwhelming majority of the faculty, the department may need to give additional attention to the strengthening of “integrative” experiences within the curriculum. It is clear that GEOG 315 makes a vital contribution in this regard, strengthening both geographic skills and geographic identities among the undergraduate students. Students themselves spoke especially highly of this class. There is scope to build upon the positive contribution of classes like GEOG 315—both in socializing undergraduate students and in emphasizing more integrative aspects of a geographic education—perhaps at the capstone level. The department may want to work on the development of core and “integrative” experiences for undergraduates, which help them understand the central identity of the program/discipline and how technical tools, such as GIS and remote sensing, relate to the substantive elements that make up that identity. GEOG 315 performs this important function and should be taught by a faculty member rather than a graduate student. Other courses should stress this integration, too.
- In response to the concern expressed by some faculty that the identity of the undergraduate major is disproportionately GIS-centric, the department may wish to explore the scope for enriching the number of “entry points” to the major at the 100-300 level, for instance through topics like feminist and postcolonial geographies, or political ecology. The strength and diversity of faculty expertise establishes an excellent basis for such offerings.

- Finally, key members of the department noted that they did not see the last review report of the department, written a decade ago, until recently. University administrators should ensure that this report is fully distributed to faculty, students, staff, alumni, and friends of the department.