

**Report of the Review Committee for the University of Washington Department of Geography**  
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The University of Washington's Geography Department is one of the top-ranked programs in the world, and has maintained this preeminence for 50 years. The Department is noted for its emphasis on human geography, as distinct from physical geography, and for its strengths in critical digital geographies, uneven development, political ecology and health, and race and immigration. It has long attracted the best graduate students, who receive excellent training and many of whom have become leading scholars in the field. The Department also provides high-quality instruction to a growing number of undergraduates, many of whom focus their studies in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), taught here with critical attention to its societal implications as well as its technical aspects. The Department also houses a for-profit online Master's program in Geographic Information Systems (MGIS).

The Department overall is very strong; the faculty are engaged in robust scholarly careers that infuse the quality of their teaching and the range of their curriculum, and are superb college and disciplinary citizens. But given the departure of two faculty and the anticipated retirements of five other faculty in the next few years, the Department now finds itself at a critical juncture. Investment in faculty hires is urgently needed. The MGIS program also faces a critical juncture, and will likely require significant revisioning and reconfiguration if it is to continue. The following report includes more detailed commentary and suggestions in regard to the undergraduate, graduate, and MGIS programs and, at the end, our key recommendations for the University administration and to the Geography Department.

Overview

The Review Committee was unanimously impressed by and appreciative of the thorough and thoughtful self-study produced by the Chair, Lucy Jarosz, and colleagues and staff in the Geography Department.

Our reading of the Department's self-study, our many conversations with faculty, staff, and students on campus, and our combined academic experience have made clear that the University of Washington's Geography Department is **one of the best geography programs in the US**. The Department has consistently ranked in the top ten of geography programs nationally, and recently was ranked 18<sup>th</sup> in a global survey of universities. This is particularly remarkable given the relatively small size of the Department (14 tenure-track faculty) and the fact the Department focuses on human geography (as noted in the self-study, human geography's citation culture differs from that of physical geography). The Department, in other words, is "punching way above its weight."

Geography faculty are **highly productive scholars** engaged in agenda-setting and creative research in the discipline, ranging from critical digital geographies to uneven development to political ecology and health to race and immigration. The faculty have been successful in garnering external support for and recognition of their research from the most prestigious national organizations including the National Science Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the Department's research excellence has been nurtured and developed by consistently hiring the smartest and most innovative scholars, thereby creating a forward-thinking scholarly culture. In other words, this is not a department that has 'rested on its laurels;' instead it has consistently sought out scholars who offer the most creative new thinking in geography and related social sciences.

The Geography Department and its faculty are especially notable for several areas of unique strength that are represented in only one or two Geography programs nationally. Most noteworthy is the Department's position as a **center of excellence in critical Geographic Information Science (critical GIS)** encompassing critical geospatial analysis, geovisualization, digital geographies, and related fields. The field of critical GIS explores the development and application of spatial data technologies by moving beyond the technical and methodological aspects of computer science to consider the visualization, representation, application, and societal ramifications of spatially arrayed digital data. The Geography Department's expertise in these fields situates geospatial analysis in a liberal arts perspective, combining technical proficiency with fundamental questions regarding the societal implications of collecting, organizing, and applying spatial data as a means of knowledge production in a digitally mediated world. In addition, the Department serves the needs of undergraduate and graduate students by connecting computer science to the social sciences and humanities in a way that is unavailable elsewhere in the University.

The faculty's creative and impactful research infuses and is shaped by the quality of their teaching and the range of their curriculum. More detailed discussion of graduate and undergraduate education follows later in this report; but here it is important to note that the Department **attracts the best and brightest to its graduate program** and in turn produces scholars who are leading the intellectual agendas of the discipline. Evidence of the excellent training provided by the PhD program includes the numerous prestigious awards their students have garnered for their work from NSF, the Ford Foundation, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (to name just a few), and the placement of their students into tenure-track faculty lines in top geography departments nationally and globally. Enrollment in undergraduate Geography courses and the number of majors in Geography are increasing, led particularly by interest in geospatial technologies but sustained by the fact that this STEM field is housed in a Department of Geography that brings it into conversation with important and critical societal issues.

In addition, Geography faculty have been **superb citizens of the University**, contributing leadership to many interdisciplinary and cross-unit initiatives and programs, including the Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology, the Law, Societies and Justice Program, and the UW Honors Program. In fact, 37% of the Geography faculty serve in key university-wide

leadership roles. In effect, however, this means that over one-third of the faculty have significant proportions of their time and effort committed outside the Department. Given these external commitments, in addition to increasing student enrollments and the recent decrease in the number of faculty, it should not be surprising that our review committee noted a critical need for additional resources and capacity for the Department. Our recommendations can be found in our concluding section, but here we note that for the Department to maintain and build on its reputation as the “jewel in the crown” of geography as a field, **it is crucial that two faculty lines be granted to the Department in the short term, with two more additional lines to follow in the medium term.**

### Undergraduate Program

Geography has long had one of the most engaging and innovative undergraduate curricula in the social sciences at the University of Washington. **In terms of enrollment numbers and majors, geography is in an especially strong position.** Currently, demand for seats in geography courses far outstrips supply, and the Department has more majors – approximately 250 – than at any time since 2010. Moreover, the undergraduate students that gravitate towards geography are talented and diverse.

As a committee, we were quite impressed with the students we met. Roughly half had transferred to UW from community colleges while half were double majors. All appreciated the ways that geography courses wove together many different and productive ways for thinking about the world, enabling them to place the most important contemporary issues in critical perspective while deepening their awareness of social justice issues. All the undergraduates we met appreciated the **high quality of the instruction** and faculty responsiveness to student needs, the flexibility of the major requirements, and the relatively small size of the Department that enabled them to feel part of a community.

All of them also spoke of the Department’s tremendous **challenges in staffing necessary courses**, especially with tenure-stream faculty members. For this quarter and the next, the Department has had to cancel courses that easily enroll over one hundred students, due to lack of an instructor. Approximately half of the current undergraduate curriculum is being taught by doctoral candidates and recent PhDs, much of their salary being covered by “buy-out” funds garnered by tenured faculty members teaching in other programs. While most graduate students and part-time lecturers receive very high marks for their teaching, everyone agrees that the undergraduate curriculum needs to be more firmly anchored in courses taught by professors. One student estimated that only ten of her sixty Geography credits were from courses taught by permanent members of the Department.

The College of Arts & Sciences needs to remedy this situation as soon as possible. Geography is doing exactly what the College and, more specifically, the Division of Social Sciences need: it is **drawing in STEM-focused students and providing them with a top-notch liberal arts education** that includes the development of a technical set of skills and critical perspectives on those skills. More than 60% of geography majors choose the “GIS, Mapping and Society” track (the other

three tracks are “Cities, Citizenship and Migration”; “Environment, Economy and Sustainability”; and “Globalization, Health and Development”) while less than one-third of the tenure-stream faculty in the Department teach courses on GIS and critical digital geographies. Many who pursue geography’s GIS track are students who were unable to gain admittance to Computer Science & Engineering or the Informatics major in the Information School. For the budgetary health and intellectual vitality of the College and the division – not just the Department -- geography needs to receive the tenure-stream faculty resources to retain and educate these students.

**Hiring new faculty** is the single most important answer to the self-study question of how can the Department best “extend and enliven the substantive core” of its undergraduate program. To meet growing student demand, the first one or two new hires should be faculty who can teach courses in critical digital geographies and help the entire Department to incorporate digital modules in most, if not all, geography courses. Additional priorities for faculty hiring should be delineated in discussion by the Department but the Review Committee’s conversations with faculty and students suggested that these priorities might include population geography and health; political ecology and nature-society relations; political geography, migration, and refugee studies; and critical race studies/indigeneity/Black geographies. In addition to these thematic areas, we also heard a need for new faculty lines to bring greater international expertise – especially in the regional areas of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia – to the curriculum.

The imbalance between undergraduate student demand, which is strongly focused in the area of GIS, and the strengths of the permanent faculty, presents particular challenges. Hiring a lecturer whose teaching focuses on the area of high undergraduate demand is often a reasonable solution to such imbalances (which are not unique to geography). The rapidly changing and high-tech nature of GIS as a field, however, makes it unlikely that an individual with excellent GIS skills could be hired to a lecturer position – and even if they could, the teaching-intensive nature of a lecturer position would make it difficult for such a person to remain current with the leading edge of GIS as a field. We suggest that the College consider authorizing the Geography Department to **hire a three-year teaching postdoctoral position**; although a postdoc would not teach as many courses as a lecturer, such a position would attract top-notch junior scholars bringing fresh ideas and skills to support the GIS component of the curriculum.

To properly support GIS courses, which often involve a lot of one-on-one or tutorial instruction, as well as other courses, the College needs to **increase the Department’s TA funding**. Stagnant instructional budgets have led to a decreasing number of TA positions, leaving labor-intensive geography courses understaffed.

We also concluded that the Department could “extend and enliven” its undergraduate program by undertaking an extensive **review of the curriculum**. Significantly, the Department has introduced or substantially revised twenty courses over the past five years. Moreover, faculty have many excellent ideas, some of them mentioned in the self-study, of how to further refresh

the curriculum: broadening 200-level courses; sorting out gaps and overlaps between courses; building stronger connections to programs with related intellectual and pedagogical priorities including CHID, CSDE, and LSJ; and developing more senior-level or capstone-type courses like Sarah Elwood's "Senior Research in Geography," that requires majors to apply what they learned in courses to work with non-profit organizations. To ensure a "deep dive" into undergraduate curriculum issues, we feel that the undergraduate studies committee should, after interviews and meetings with all stakeholders, develop a series of reform proposals that then can be discussed at a retreat or series of faculty meetings.

Students also identified repetition between courses, especially at the upper level, as an issue within the curriculum and would like to see more attention to internship, alumni mentoring, and **career development opportunities** in the department. Such professionalization efforts would greatly benefit from an **increase in the advising staff**. Director of Academic Services James Baginski and Graduate Student Assistant Julian Barr are doing excellent work with undergraduates but already seem stretched to near capacity.

Another pressing need for both the undergraduate and graduate programs is an **updating of the department's IT hardware and software resources**. According to IT Systems Supervisor Wendy Kramer and Senior Computer Specialist Lisa Sturdivant, who are doing first-rate work supporting the undergraduate, graduate, and MGIS programs, elements of the department's computer labs are twenty years out of date. In order to prepare students for the geospatial careers they seek, the department needs to provide them with training in the most current technologies and equipment. Some upgrading of IT resources might be achieved by applying for block grants from the Student Technology Fees program. More wide-ranging overhauls of the computing facilities, however, will require support from the College, especially as computing increasingly moves from site licenses and servers to renewable subscriptions. The department requires sufficient funds in its operating budget to meet the costs of cloud-based subscription services that impose recurring – rather than one-off – expenses.

### Graduate Program

The Geography Department has been **nationally and internationally recognized among the highest ranked graduate degree-granting programs for more than five decades**. The graduate program routinely attracts masters and doctoral students from the top tier of applicants across the globe, and competes for applicants with peer programs at UC-Berkeley, UCLA, the University of Minnesota, and similarly ranked institutions. Students apply to the graduate program because of its substantive strengths in critical geospatial analytics; urban, social, and political geography; political ecology; and related fields; and they come to the University of Washington to work with an internationally renowned geography faculty who, in many cases, have established the contours of these subfields of human geography. The recruitment of stellar junior faculty in recent years has only added to the visibility and reputation of the program, and the promotion with tenure of the junior faculty, which is currently being accomplished, will facilitate their greater involvement in the recruitment and mentoring of graduate students.

The number of high-quality applicants to the graduate program has remained fairly constant, with a temporary increase in applications during the 2007-08 economic recession and a return to prior levels in the most recent period, consistent with national trends. A challenge to the graduate program has arisen in the last two years in the form of declining numbers of admitted students accepting offers to join the program. The decline is partly attributed to an over-cautious policy of limiting **funding offers for incoming graduate students** to two years, with the opportunity for additional funding beyond the initial period pending satisfactory progress in the program. This policy proved ill-advised in a highly competitive environment in which high-caliber applicants are able to obtain multi-year funding offers from first-rank institutions. Program faculty have addressed the problem for the upcoming admissions cycle by offering funding packages that are more competitive with peer institutions, and enrollments are expected to return to prior levels of seven or eight entering students per year beginning in 2018.

An enduring problem remains, however, in the form of limited **overall funding resources to support graduate students** in the program. This problem, endemic throughout public higher education, was identified in the previous departmental review completed in 2007 and is one that can only be addressed through the allocation of funding resources at the university-level and above. It must be said in this regard that an investment in support of graduate education convincingly generates substantial tangible and intangible returns to the university in the form of national and international visibility, recognition of the university's position at the cutting edge of scholarship, and confirmation of the university's standing among the top tier of Research-1 institutions in the nation. We urge the Division of Social Sciences, the College of Arts & Science, and the Graduate School to make graduate fellowships a top fundraising priority in the current capital campaign, "Be Boundless."

The Review Committee's meetings with faculty and current graduate students surfaced several issues with respect to the internal operation of the program. There appears to be some uncertainty, shared by faculty and students, regarding the graduate admissions process, specifically with how the agreement by an individual faculty member to mentor an incoming student factors in the admissions decision. In addition, several graduate students noted a lack of **transparency regarding program requirements and procedures**. The faculty seem aware of these issues and are taking steps to address them and to improve synchronization in the admissions process.

#### MGIS Program

The graduate program, and therefore the Geography Department as a whole, continue to be affected by a distracting and somewhat debilitating **uncertainty over the present and future status of the MGIS program** administered by the Department. The Master of Geographic Information Systems for Sustainability Management (MGIS) program offers a fully on-line, part-time, two-year professional degree aimed at working professionals seeking to advance their career in the GIS field. The MGIS program was the subject of a program review last year and our

committee did not endeavor to repeat that review only a year later. However, the 2016 Report identified substantive, operational, and administrative issues with the program, not all of which have been resolved. The topic of the MGIS program surfaced in every single interview conducted with faculty and staff during our visit.

Originally proposed—and justified—as a revenue-generating opportunity for the Department, the MGIS program **has not met revenue expectations in recent years while imposing considerable strain on faculty and staff** in meeting the teaching and support needs of the program. As a result, there is far from majority support among faculty to continue the program, at least in its present form, and there is a strong sentiment in favor of pausing the program pending potential new faculty hires and a focused consideration as to whether the program aligns with new initiatives and anticipated directions for the future course of the Department. During the pause period, faculty and staff time and resources currently directed to the MGIS program could be usefully redirected to support GIS needs elsewhere in the Department.

Among the challenging **issues to be addressed in deciding whether to continue the program** are: (1) the need for greater integration of the MGIS program in the Department as a whole, made difficult by the institutional, administrative, and substantive barriers separating the for-profit MGIS program from the public educational and research mission of the Department; (2) the continuing diversion of financial, teaching, and staff resources from the Department to support the MGIS program combined with the program's failure to meet its anticipated revenue-producing potential; and (3) the ambiguity resulting from narrowing the program's identity, substantive focus, and potential market from the wide appeal of a degree in GIS to the more limited ambit of sustainability management.

### Department Life

The self-study posed the question of how “collegiality and active engagement” might be better fostered within the Department. People interviewed expressed a variety of views regarding the state of collegial relations. While some felt that the Department was emerging out of a bit of a rough patch and appreciated last year's facilitated workshops on “core values,” others emphasized the need to allow greater space for respectful and constructive disagreement, and more in-depth and rigorous discussion of policy and curriculum matters. Some felt that graduate students and more junior faculty members were being asked to carry too much of the load of building community while senior faculty members have tended to redirect their service obligations outside of the Department.

All agreed that Department morale had taken a significant hit this autumn with the absence of an incoming cohort of graduate students and the College's decision not to authorize a faculty search. As one person put it, it “feels like we are being set up administratively for failure.” Other faculty discussed the ongoing demoralization produced by stagnant salaries. The absence of significant salary raises encourages senior faculty to take administrative positions outside of

the Department that come with summer salary, and increases the risk of losing junior and mid-level faculty to better-resourced institutions.

That said, much common ground exists among faculty, students, and staff about what would turn things around. Authorizing four searches over the next three to four years would go a very long way to meeting student needs and preserving the Department's international reputation as a research leader in human geography. Everyone we interviewed agrees that the Department is at a critical juncture. With increasing numbers of students and a shrinking faculty, and with several retirements on the near horizon, **now is the time for the College and University to reinvest in the Department.** Given geography's exceptionally strong national ranking, deep commitment to quality undergraduate and graduate education, and its relatively small size, it is difficult to imagine a unit where the University would get more bang for its buck.

### **Key Recommendations for University Administration:**

1. Continue the program, with the next review in ten years.
2. Authorize new faculty hires. Two hires are urgently required in the immediate term (i.e., next year), and two more in the medium term (i.e., within two to three years following).
  - At least one of the immediate-term hires should be a scholar with significant strength in critical GIS, an area of pressing need at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
  - Two additional faculty hires should bring expertise in areas of need as determined by the Geography faculty. Given the high degree of consensus expressed by faculty with whom we met, we expect that priorities might include population geography and health; political ecology and nature-society relations; political geography, migration, and refugee studies; and critical race studies/indigeneity/Black geographies. In addition to these thematic areas, we also heard a need for new faculty lines to bring greater international expertise – especially in the regional areas of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia – to the curriculum.
  - A three-year postdoctoral position in GIS *in addition to* these permanent faculty hires could help address the pressing undergraduate student demand.
3. Increase the Department's TA funding so that it is commensurate with current and anticipated increases in undergraduate enrollments. Moreover, the Division of the Social Sciences, the College of Arts & Sciences, and the Graduate School should support this top-flight graduate program by making graduate fellowships a top fundraising priority in the current capital campaign.

4. Provide support to update the hardware and software infrastructure for GIS research and teaching, recognizing that the move toward subscription-based cloud computing may require that the University develop new funding mechanisms.

**Key Recommendations to the Department:**

1. Review the undergraduate curriculum and make changes as necessary to address gaps and overlaps between courses.
2. Strengthen career-oriented learning opportunities for undergraduates.
3. Examine and streamline the graduate admissions process to synchronize the role of an individual faculty member's agreement to mentor an incoming student.
4. Consider ways to improve faculty mentoring and advising of graduate students and improve the dissemination of information regarding program requirements and procedures for progressing through the degree process.
5. Implement the recommendations of the 2017 Review Committee for the MGIS program and consider pausing the program pending new faculty hiring and alignment of the program with new initiatives and directions of the Department.