May 21, 2014

TO: Kris Olds, Chair, Geography

FROM: John Karl Scholz, Dean

RE: Completion of L&S Review of Geography Programs:

- Geography (BA, BS)
- Cartography and Geographic Information Systems (BA, BS)
- Master of Science – Geography
- Master of Science - Cartography and Geographic Information Systems
- Doctor of Philosophy – Geography

On May 6, 2014, the L&S Academic Planning Council considered the materials submitted in fulfillment of the mandated review of several academic programs offered in Geography. These materials included the department’s self-study, the review committee report, and comments offered to correct errors of fact in that report.

Before I summarize the council’s discussion, I would like to thank you and everyone else who participated in the review. Though L&S has streamlined our approach to review, it still requires effort and attention to prepare the self-study, to discuss it, and to work with the review committee. In this case, council members and observers were impressed by the quality and clarity of the self-study. They were impressed by the extent to which the work in Geography supports not only the department’s programs, but provides key support to other programs (notably, the L&S undergraduate major in Environmental Studies, which is administered by the Nelson Institute). The council commends you and your colleagues for progress made since the last review, and in particular, efforts to improve the departmental climate and diversity.

In discussing the review and the committee’s report, the APC supported a number of the recommendations:

- It makes good sense to continue to pursue enhanced “marketing” of the major. While the department’s service to and support of other programs was noted, we are hopeful that these marketing efforts will contribute to increased visibility for the major and higher enrollments in core courses. Continued attention to graduate program matters (noted by the review committee) seems warranted.
The council noted the department efforts to formulate a proposal to reduce the faculty teaching load.

The department’s proposal will be reviewed by Greg Downey, the incoming Associate Dean, later this summer. Though the APC did not engage in extensive discussions of Geography’s attention to the assessment of student learning, I think it is worth noting that the department does attend to how and how well Geography programs function. The department’s analysis of the challenges in implementing its assessment plan led to a reasonable revision of that plan. But though the original plan may have been overly ambitious, we see that you and your colleagues have obtained and used data from the capstone evaluation to understand the undergraduate program better and to improve it. That (and other) work seems to be informing Geography’s current initiative to overhaul the undergraduate major, the course array, improve the Honor’s experience and expand internship opportunities. As noted above, Geography has set itself the goal of increasing the number of Geography majors: these efforts, informed by what you know about student learning and the student experience in the program, should help. In addition, the faculty’s ongoing attention to graduate education is informed by analysis of student performance at key milestones; this is an appropriate and effective mechanism for monitoring individual student performance as well as for gauging the overall health of the program. We encourage you to continue these efforts.

Finally, I would like to note that the self-study identified many challenges and priorities. While it is extremely useful to bring all issues to the surface in a planning exercise, I would encourage you and your colleagues to “prioritize your priorities” and organize them into a comprehensive long range plan, so you can better navigate through them.

The L&S Academic Planning Council was pleased to consider this review complete. I join them in thanking you and your colleagues for helping us to understand this program (past, present, and future) better.

xc:
Maria Cancian, Associate Dean for Social Sciences, L&S
Greg Downey, Incoming Associate Dean for Social Sciences, L&S
Elaine M. Klein, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning, L&S
Daniel Kleinman, Associate Dean for Social Studies, Graduate School
Jocelyn Milner, Director of Academic Planning and Institutional Research
January 7, 2014

To: John Karl Scholz, Dean, Letters & Science

From: Martha Alibali, Psychology
Don Moynihan, LaFollette
Mary Louise Gomez, Curriculum & Instruction (GFEC Representative)

RE: Review of Geography Academic Programs

CC: Maria Cancian, Associate Dean for Social Studies and Fiscal Initiatives, L&S
Elaine M. Klein, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning, L&S
Daniel Kleinman, Associate Dean for Social Studies, Graduate School

This report responds to an invitation by the Dean of Letters & Science to provide an evaluation of the academic programs of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Geography. The review committee was made up of Martha Alibali of the Department of Psychology, Don Moynihan of the La Follette School of Public Affairs, and Mary Louise Gomez, of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, who also served as the GFEC representative on the committee. As part of our deliberations, we reviewed the Department’s recent self-study and additional departmental materials, and met with the representatives of the Department staff, faculty and students on November 18 and December 2, 2013.

The Geography Department has consistently been and remains a top-ranked department in the United States. The Department seeks to balance equal strength between four distinct areas of geography: human geography, physical geography, people-environment geography, and cartography and Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

The Department self-study was thoughtful and thorough, demonstrating careful consideration of an array of different challenges, and possible steps to address them. There might have been a more clear prioritization of these challenges, but their comprehensiveness is impressive, indicating an awareness of nearly every aspect of academic life, and in most cases, positive action to respond to challenges when such responses are within the control of the Department.1

The review committee was able to validate the claims of the self-study. Our general impression was that, since the last review, the Department has engaged thoughtfully in curricular and academic issues, and put in place more systematic mechanisms to deal

1 One error we found in the self-review is that faculty were listed as serving on several tenure committees. This should read “graduate committees.”

K.Olds: Correct - this was a regularly repeated typo in the faculty overview section.
with these issues than had previously existed. For example, in recent years a curriculum committee was formed to oversee graduate and undergraduate curriculum. Up to that point, there had been consistent attention to the undergraduate curriculum, but less systematic attention to the graduate curriculum. The work of these committees demonstrates careful thought about the structure of program offerings, the use of appropriate curricular requirements, and mechanisms to assess learning.

Our short review prioritizes attention to the primary academic programs at the graduate and undergraduate level, as well as key strategic issues for the Department.

Geography Department Graduate Program

The graduate program of the Department includes a Masters of Science in Geography, a Masters of Science in Cartography and Geographic Information Systems, and a Doctorate of Philosophy in Geography. Since 2008 there have been about 40 students enrolled each year in the PhD program, and about 15 students in the Masters programs. Graduates find themselves in appropriate placements given their degrees, with PhD graduates largely finding academic positions.

The committee met primarily with doctoral students, who were generally genial in their perspectives on the Department and their studying and working in various fields of geography. They agreed that the Geography Department was a small and supportive environment.

The students also reflected various lengths of study from a beginning doctoral student to one who was to finish his doctorate in May 2014. Several graduate students said they hoped to finish in 4 years. The Department reports that the time to graduate for those who complete the PhD program is 5.7 years on average, which appears to be slightly lower than the average for social science units on campus. The doctoral students’ one noteworthy concern regarded their preliminary examinations, which will be noted in more depth next in this report.

Qualifying/Preliminary Examinations

Students expressed concern that the care and caution that faculty used in negotiating qualifying/preliminary examinations inadvertently resulted in a good deal of stress for students. The students understood that the faculty were attempting to be respectful to other faculty contributing questions and lists of books to be read, and also respectful to the students, but felt that the prolonged was prolonged, sometimes up to a year, and caused undue anxiety.

The graduate students also said that there was not adequate symmetry across the four different areas of geography as to how the examinations were negotiated or carried out. Students believed there were different expectations and standards held for students in different areas, particularly across qualifying examinations, but generally found this to be true in all processes of academic progress in the Department. Some program areas have lists of required reading for the qualifying examinations; others have questions negotiated
among faculty and students. These exams generally are administered in three or four sets of exam questions given in a set number of hours.

Further, students agreed that there were few to no failures of the qualifying examinations. They were able to write an addendum if the answers were found inadequate. They appreciated this courtesy.

The review committee recommends that more transparent and clear procedures be instituted across areas for all processes of study. The self-study document stated that graduate students have served on departmental committees (since 2009) and that the Department has said that it has worked to have (self-study, page 51):

“Revised Ph.D. qualifying exams to create more uniformity across subareas by:

• Articulating a common set of exam principles shared by all four subareas that also acknowledges their differing needs and intellectual traditions
• Requiring each subarea to have a written documents identifying core bodies of knowledge (e.g., reading lists) and exam procedures, (including appeal and retaking).”

However, these attempts to have common procedures and processes appear to need some adjustments, given statements by current graduate students.

Funding
While not all PhD students were admitted with funding, those that came in the last year ultimately did find funding. The graduate program was previously somewhat larger, but the Department elected to admit fewer students who lacked clear sources of funding. Students reported that they generally received either a five-year guarantee of funding if they enrolled as a doctoral student and a three-year guarantee if they were enrolling for a master’s degree.

Being a teaching assistant or primary instructor is a clear mechanism for graduate students to receive funding. Since additional faculty have been hired in recent years, some students noted there were fewer opportunities to be a primary instructor, and their teaching opportunities are more likely to be limited to leading discussion sections. The Graduate Program Coordinator seeks student input on teaching preferences for the coming year. Those students who had guarantees remaining on their graduate program “promises” were the first to receive their preferences.

One tension is that faculty would like to see students funded, but would prefer to work with them in a research context, rather than have the student tied up in teaching. Some students are funded via faculty grants. Students would like additional transparency on how such research positions are awarded.

Revised Handbook for Graduate Study
The self-study (page 52) notes that a revised and more detailed Geography Graduate Handbook would be helpful to graduate students about “roles, rights, obligations, responsibilities, and decision-making pathways.” The review committee concurs with this
statement. We recommend a revised and more detailed Geography Graduate Handbook be developed.

As it is, there are other mechanisms by which basic information is communicated to and among graduate students. In recent years, the program has attempted to systematically convey to students at the pre-dissertation stage statements regarding appropriate benchmarks and expectations for progress. Graduate students also host town hall events twice a year to exchange views about the program, and in some cases invite members of the curriculum committee.

**Undergraduate Program**

The Department offers two undergraduate majors, Geography and Cartography/Geographic Information Systems. There are approximately 100 majors (across years), with 30 to 40 students graduating with a Geography or Cartography/GIS major each year.

**Curricular issues**

Undergraduate students declare a concentration in one of the departmental areas at the same time that they declare their majors. In the past, there was a generic set of skills courses for all concentrations. The Department is currently in the process of reshaping the undergraduate curriculum to incorporate more specific skills courses for each concentration. These changes are not expected to affect teaching demands on faculty, but they are expected to make a positive difference from a student perspective. Students feel an increasing pressure to specialize, driven in part by changes in the job market, and also by perceived needs to acquire “marketable skills.” The move towards specialization also helps to strengthen student-faculty relationships.

As part of the curriculum revisions, faculty are also considering broadening the capstone experience (currently a single course) by allowing projects from other method/skills courses to be starting points for capstone projects. The goal is to extend and enrich the capstone experience for students, and better integrate it with other aspects of the curriculum. This seems like productive direction for change.

The current availability of undergraduate courses was viewed as good. Only two courses are required, and students have multiple options for fulfilling all other requirements within the curriculum. This relatively loose structure seems to work reasonably well.

**Undergraduate Advising**

The recent hiring of a half-time undergraduate advisor is an important positive change in the Department. However, the advisor is currently spread fairly thin. She is responsible for both academic and career advising for two different departments (Geography and Anthropology). She is working to develop appropriate career advising opportunities for Geography students, however this is challenging given that her time is split (it was noted that other departments have dedicated career advisors). She is also working to bolster the
focus on career skills development opportunities within the Department (e.g., service learning opportunities).

*Undergraduate Student Experience and Concerns*

A member of the committee met individually with two undergraduate students (one a Cartography/GIS major, and the other a combined Geography and Cartography/GIS major) to get their perspective on the Department. Both were very positive about their experiences in the Department. Indeed, they found it easy to identify strengths of the Department, but quite challenging to identify weaknesses. This generally positive view of the Department aligns well with the results of the senior exit survey, which also reveals a high level of satisfaction with the Department.

One issue that the students noted was that students in the two majors, and to a lesser extent, students in different concentrations, are somewhat isolated from one another. They wished for a stronger sense of cohesion and community as a department. The undergraduate Geography club could play some role in this; however, the students felt that the current club serves only a small number of students, and that it could do more to build community and to help foster cohesion across the different majors and concentrations.

The students also felt that Geography as a major should have stronger presence in L&S. The students noted that many of their peers did not know that Geography was a possible major. One of the students noted that at SOAR, he expressed an interest in Cartography, and even the SOAR staff was unaware of the major. This points to the need for stronger “marketing” of the major within L&S. We agree with the importance of this effort, and we also note that the new undergraduate advisor is working actively to address it.

On the whole, however, the students were very satisfied with their experience within the Department. Some of the key strengths that they highlighted were close relationships with faculty members and graduate students (both in courses and in laboratory settings), opportunities to receive training in relevant job skills, faculty attentiveness to career advising issues, and the assistance of the new undergraduate advisor.

*Enrollment in the Undergraduate Major*

Given the national prominence of the Department, the level of enrollment in undergraduate programs seems low, and has declined in recent years, especially in the People and Environment area. Faculty offered a variety of reasons for this pattern. Some noted a general trend of less interest in humanities and liberal arts studies. The drop also can be partially explained by relatively low faculty levels at one point, meaning fewer classes were available. Others pointed to a basic failure to teach Geography at the high school level, meaning that incoming students did not have a good sense of what the topic was. This perhaps explains the generally low interest in the field, but not the more recent decline, and could be remedied somewhat by better outreach to incoming students (e.g. by meeting students at SOAR).
The most persuasive explanation we found was the addition of undergraduate environmental majors offered by the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. The Department has a complex but generally positive relationship with the Nelson Institute. They share the same building, and many Geography faculty were instrumental in creating and continuing to run the Institute. At the same time, there is a sense that students who might have otherwise signed up as Geography majors are taking Nelson majors instead. Some Geography faculty report that a significant portion of students in their classes are taking the Nelson major in Environmental Studies.

When the Nelson undergraduate major was established, students were required to take a double major if taking a Nelson major. This might have been expected to generate new students for Geography, but more often it seems to be the case that students select second majors that are perceived as being more clearly distinct from environmental studies, e.g. political science or economics.

We were told that undergraduate students in the Nelson Institute generated credits that were returned to L&S. If this is the case, the effects of Nelson are not negative for L&S as a whole, but have weakened interest in Geography as a major. This could also lead to an underestimation of the relative contribution of Geography faculty to undergraduate teaching.

Staff

The Department has sizeable number of staff, reflecting the work of sub-units such as the State Cartographers Office that perform a variety of functions, including direct outreach. Staff expressed a sense of being very proud of the Department and faculty, but also expressed concerns. They feel overburdened in terms of demands on their time. The assignment of a half-time undergraduate advisor may have inadvertently increased these burdens, because of her efforts to more systematically help students connect to staff for opportunities such as internships. The quality of the educational experience is being improved by these opportunities, but staff are having difficulty managing these additional demands.

Some staff also felt an inadequate connection with faculty, and felt that most faculty do not understand the potential value of the sub-units, or explore ways to work with them. This is not uniformly true, as the cartography and GIS expertise of staff allows for strong connections with some faculty. But in general, although faculty understand that staff are important in outreach, they are generally not perceived as central to research. The longer-term staff recognized that over time they have become better integrated into the governance of the Department. Given the central importance of staff to the public profile of the Department, there is potential to better educate faculty on the relative contributions of staff, and perhaps create opportunities to find additional connections between faculty and staff interests. We recommend that the Department consider how to better integrate staff and faculty research and outreach opportunities.
Staff also expressed concern about the lack of resources for students. Much of Geography is interactive by nature, and not having enough TAs for undergraduate classes is problematic because more interactive aspects and small discussion sections cannot be pursued. Staff also pointed to recent turnover in their ranks. Different people left for different reasons, so there does not seem to be a specific staff-faculty problem, simply the more general problem of underpayment of classified staff at the university level.

**Diversity and Workplace Climate**

Historically, the Department has had issues with faculty diversity, and progress in dealing with this problem bears some comment. The lack of diversity is acknowledged in the self-study, and is most glaring in terms of gender balance among tenured professors (there is only one tenured female faculty member). In the past, some female candidates who had been hired at the junior level were judged not to be progressing well and counseled to avoid the tenure process.

Faculty acknowledged that, as late as the 1990s, the departmental atmosphere was not fully welcoming to females (the phrase “old boys club” was used multiple times in our discussions with faculty). Some junior faculty noted that the Department had developed a reputation as a fraught place to work, and this reputation has not been completely removed even as the actual climate has improved. 

In the last 15 years there has been a serious and prolonged attention to dealing with diversity and workplace climate issues, and the Department deserves a good deal of credit for the significant progress that has been made. At the untenured level, there is an even split between male and female candidates. Untenured faculty report that awareness of the legacy of past problems has kept the Department sensitive to diversity issues. The female faculty reported a strong sense of support from their colleagues. More generally, faculty report a very positive work atmosphere, which is impressive given that Geography consists of four distinct fields of study, which could become the basis for disagreement or dissension.

**Junior Faculty Mentoring and Retention**

*Faculty Mentoring*

In seeking to move past prior workplace climate issues, the Department has devised a detailed process of mentoring for junior faculty, with both a tenure and mentoring committee. The chair of the mentoring committee is also a member of the tenure committee. The faculty is considering reexamining the structure of these committees, given the current very high number of junior faculty, which makes it difficult to rotate senior faculty on both committees.

Untenured faculty offered strong approval for the mentoring process, noting that it gave them multiple senior colleagues to talk to, but also noting that they felt that they could
approach colleagues not on their mentoring committee. Some who have experience on other campuses noted that the mentoring process in Wisconsin is more structured than other places where they have worked.

Retention
In the next 2-3 years the Department expects retention issues, especially for junior candidates approaching tenure, who may have opportunities to obtain a higher salary and lower teaching loads elsewhere. Historically, the Department has not competed with outside offers. This has changed in recent years, but the Department feels that it lacks resources to contribute its share to significant salary raises that matching the market would require.

The Department currently has a 2-2 teaching load. Junior faculty can take a number of course releases, and any faculty can compete for one of seven course releases every year. The Department has considered requesting a change to a 2-1 load. Faculty members noted that this change could be implemented without harm to the undergraduate or graduate programs; however, we did not see details of how this might occur. We suggest that the Department develop a more systematic plan to demonstrate capacity to move to a 2:1 load, and that they consider raising this issue with the college in the future. This type of change could be valuable, not only for retention, but also for hiring.

Educational Innovations
The Department is looking to pursue innovations in teaching. Currently, they believe there is a market for an online professional masters program that focuses on GIS. GIS has a variety of professional applications, and the international reputation of the Department is expected to make a course offered by the Department attractive outside the United States. One barrier noted by the Department, faced by all online programs started by the UW, is that the UW distinction between in-state and out-of-state fees applied also to online offerings. The out-of-state fee is above the flat rate that peer competitors charge for online degrees, limiting the ability to market the program outside of Wisconsin, which is the primary market for an online offering. The Department wanted to raise awareness of how a flat rate for online offerings would improve their ability to compete in new markets.

Summary and Recommendations
Our overall assessment of the Department is positive, reflecting its strong history and the current efforts of faculty to deal with strategic issues and challenges. Many of these issues have been carefully addressed in the self-study. Our observations and recommendations should be understood in this general context of strong performance. In this final section, we highlight five specific recommendations that we have identified in this report.
1. For the graduate program, we recommend that more transparent and clear procedures be instituted across areas for all processes of study, including the qualifying/preliminary examinations.

2. We recommend a revised and more detailed Geography Graduate Handbook be developed.

3. We recommend that the Department continue to address the need for stronger “marketing” of the major within L&S.

4. We recommend that the Department consider how to better integrate staff and faculty research and outreach opportunities.

5. If the Department seeks to pursue permission for a 2:1 teaching load, we suggest that it offers a systematic plan to demonstrate capacity to move to this status without undermining existing teaching.