March 26, 2015

Wendy Crone
Interim Dean of the Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dear Professor Crone:

Thank you for your letter summarizing the strengths of our program and detailing areas of concern. Both the strengths that you discuss and the issues of concern fit well with our perception of the program. We have discussed most of the latter issues at length in our Graduate Studies Committee and in the department as a whole, and we are happy for the opportunity to describe concrete steps we are taking to address them.

In responding to each issue, we use the most recent metrics from the Graduate School’s profile of our program, dated 2/6/15. It should be noted that some of the figures have changed from last year’s profile. While some of these changes are consistent with longer term trends, we would also like to emphasize that the number of our students enrolled in the M.S. degree plan is quite small (nine in 2014, 13-18 in the previous five years), so small changes in student numbers yield large proportional changes in M.S. student metrics such as percent with funding.

In regard to the specific areas of concern:

**Preliminary Examinations.**
The Graduate Studies Committee has recognized for a number of years that we needed more both more clarity and more consistency across subfields in the requirements for these exams. In 2012 we adopted a set of Qualifying Exam Principles (Appendix to our Graduate Handbook, p. 36 in the current version). These principles include the point that exams will cover a core body of knowledge, defined in a written and easily available form for students in each subfield; they also state general policies on the format and grading of qualifying exams. Although it has taken considerably longer than we would have liked (a fact reflected in graduate student comments on this topic during the review process), we now have detailed documents describing expectations, specific exam formats, and content of core knowledge for each subfield available in our graduate student handbook (Appendix, starting at page 37 in the current version).

**Graduate Handbook.**
As noted in your letter, we now have a handbook compiled and available online. This will be updated regularly as policies are revised or new material needs to be added.
Funding Issues.
This has also been a major topic of discussion within our GSC and the department as a whole, with added emphasis because of the current uncertainty regarding the university’s future budget. To provide some background on this for the GFEC: Ten years ago, there was not a consensus among our faculty on how many students should be admitted without funding guarantees, and on how much to encourage those students to enroll despite the uncertainty of their funding. Since then we have moved fairly decisively toward much greater reluctance to admit students without guarantees. This is evident in our program profile. Our numbers of applicants and new enrollments have fluctuated but do not display an overall trend since 2005-2006; however, our number of admits dropped substantially with the 2010-2011 academic year and have remained at the same lower level since. With that said, we still do have some admissions without funding, and we are revisiting that issue this spring in the GSC, with proposals to more explicitly emphasize that Ph.D. student admissions without guarantees will be rare and require unusual circumstances.

Your letter specifically highlights the percentages of students who are funded for the first four years of their Ph.D. program (now up to 85%) or first two years of their M.S. program (up slightly to 91%). The figure for the Ph.D. program may still be affected by our earlier practice of admitting more students without funding; regardless, we would like both figures to be as close to 100% as possible. For the past three academic years, all of our M.S. students have received university funding. Almost all of these M.S. students are in residence and the small portion that do not have funding guarantees tend to be in the Cartography/GIS subfield where project assistantships are relatively abundant. However, we still have 10 to 14 Ph.D. students each year (about 25% of our current headcount) who do not have university funding. Many of these students are no longer in residence and many are employed elsewhere (e.g., two in the design division of the New York Times); therefore, the best way to reduce their number is through our efforts to improve rates of progress toward degrees, discussed under the next heading. We have generally been successful in finding funding for Ph.D. students whose guarantees have expired but who are still in residence.

Gender Issues.
Ten years ago there was a significant gender imbalance across our graduate program as a whole (60-66% male students). We have made an effort to move toward greater balance during the recruitment process and there is an overall trend in that direction (fall 2014 enrollment was 48% female, 52% male). Progress was faster for the M.S. program, but again we emphasize the much smaller number of students enrolled in that degree plan (currently 9 vs. 53 in the Ph.D. program). In 2014, gender balance in the Ph.D. was substantially improved (47% female, 53% male), which we hope marks a trend that will continue. We believe the imbalance in the Ph.D. program in recent years primarily reflected continuing imbalance in recruitment and admissions, rather than lack of persistence from the M.S. program. Note that most incoming Ph.D. students do not come from our M.S. program.

Doctoral Time to Degree/Completion Rates.
These issues have been long-standing concerns within the department and our GSC. In November, 2011, we adopted a departmental satisfactory progress policy which builds on the policy of the Graduate School (in an appendix of our graduate handbook, starting on p. 30 of the current version). The policy states specific benchmarks for expected progress, such as time to completion of the general preliminary exam or advancement to dissertator status, and somewhat later benchmarks after which progress will be considered unsatisfactory. Unsatisfactory progress triggers a hold on enrollment and ultimately a lapse in funding guarantees, until students make a formal plan for return to satisfactory progress that is approved by their advisor and the GSC. As this policy has taken effect for new students starting 2012 and all other students in Fall 2013, we believe it is having the intended effect of making students much more conscious of the need for progress toward their
degree. We recognize that further progress on this issue will also require more attention from faculty advisors, in terms of adequately advising their students and avoiding roadblocks to their progress. Development of preliminary exam policies (discussed above) should help in this regard as well. There has probably not been sufficient time for the policy to affect our 10-year doctoral completion rate (now 47%) or our overall graduate-level years to degree (still at 7.5 compared to 6.7 for peers). Our final Ph.D. program years to degree (5.9) is close to the metric for peers (5.7).

Thanks again for the opportunity to respond to these concerns raised by the GFEC. We welcome any further questions or comments on these points or our graduate program as a whole. Though we believe we have made progress on many of the issues raised in your letter, this type of review is essential in helping us develop or improvement policies to address those concerns.

Sincerely,

Kris Olds, PhD
Professor and Department Chair
December 1, 2014

Kris Olds
Department Chair, Department of Geography

Dear Professor Olds:

As you know, an important part of the university’s ongoing review process is the vetting of graduate programs by the Graduate Faculty Executive Committee (GFEC) of the Graduate School. When the College of Letters and Science assembled a review committee to conduct a decadal assessment of Geography M.S. and Ph.D. programs and the Cartography and Geographical Information Systems M.S. program, Mary Louise Gomez was asked to serve as GFEC’s representative on the review committee and was given the responsibility of attending to graduate training issues. Professor Gomez led a discussion of the review at the GFEC meeting on October 10, 2014. In this letter, I summarize the committee’s response.

GFEC members were impressed to hear that the Geography Department is consistently ranked as one of the best in the country. Committee members were also pleased to learn that graduate students typically are appropriately placed upon receipt of their degrees with doctoral students generally finding faculty positions. Finally, GFEC was glad to learn that graduate students with whom the review committee met were generally pleased with the program overall.

While the status of the program is heartening and student placement and overall satisfaction is noteworthy, GFEC learned about a number of areas of concern and related action items:

- **Preliminary Examinations.** Students believe that the time it takes to negotiate the contours of exams for individual students is too long. In addition, meetings with students suggest that efforts to establish common examination principles across areas and to identify core bodies of knowledge by area have not been completed. GFEC would like to see the development of clear procedures for the system of preliminary examinations. The committee believes this will reduce anxiety and inequities perceived by students.

- **Graduate Handbook.** At the time of review, the department did not yet have a developed and available handbook clearly specifying department policies and procedures. Thank you for the work put into making one now available (and accessible online). We encourage you to engage in an ongoing process to improve and update the handbook on a regular basis.
• Funding Issues. Generally, it appears that your students receive funding even though not all students are admitted with support. The Graduate School only has access to funding information for fellowships and assistantships payrolled through the University. From this information, it appears that you are supporting master’s students at a higher rate than doctoral students. More specifically, the Graduate School program profiles illustrate that 79% of full-time doctoral students are funded for their first four years through UW payrolled fellowships and assistantships, while 82-90% of full time master’s students are supported during their first two years through these mechanisms. Typically, when we see a high proportion of master’s level supported, programs have close to full funding for their students at the doctoral level. The department should examine its funding practices at the doctoral and master’s levels and determine if the current funding practices are as the program intends. GFEC would also encourage you to improve the transparency of departmental funding practices to students. On the matter of your funding practices, GFEC would like to learn more about your specific funding policies and practices.

• Gender Issues. GFEC wondered if there is a problem with persistence among female graduate students. The vast majority of enrolled master’s students in your programs are women, but the bulk of PhD students are men. The review did not uncover sufficient evidence to determine if persistence in your graduate programs is lower among women than men, but there is enough information to suggest this is something you should explore further. Please report on your findings and whether you determine if a plan is needed to improve the situation.

• Doctoral Time to Degree/Completion Rates. The Graduate School program profiles show a time to degree higher than peers and a 10-year doctoral completion rate of 43%. These are key indicators for graduate programs that call for a close examination of what is leading to this and what steps could be taken to foster improvement in these areas.

GFEC would like to receive a written report from you on the matters addressed above in time for consideration at its April 2015 meeting. The concerns raised by GFEC notwithstanding, the Committee commends you on maintaining a strong graduate program with generally good student outcomes and satisfaction.

Sincerely,

Wendy Crone
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

cc: Karl Scholz, College of Letters and Science
Greg Downey, College of Letters and Science
Elaine Klein, College of Letters and Science
Joe Mason, Department of Geography
Sharon Kahn, Department of Geography
Daniel Kleinman, Graduate School
Kelly Haslam, Graduate School
Jennifer Martin, Graduate School
Jocelyn Milner, Office of the Provost