

Department of Geography 2008 Academic Program Review:

Action Plan in Response to the Program Review Team Report and Recommendations

(December 18, 2008)

This document represents the Action Plan for the Department of Geography at Texas State University-San Marcos in response to the report and recommendations of the external Program Review Team (PRT) for our 2008 Academic Program Review. The PRT visitation occurred on September 11-12, 2008. The final PRT report was received on November 11, 2008. The following response is organized according to the categories and recommendations contained within the PRT report.

1. Departmental Vision, Mission and Goals

PRT Recommendation:

1. *The Department of Geography should re-write its mission, vision and goals statements to reflect its recent growth and new aspirations.*
 - a. *The department should seek to be a top tier, nationally recognized PhD-granting department.*
 - b. *The department should continue to actively recruit students from outside Texas to strengthen its national and international exposure and connections. Such initiatives inevitably lead to greater recognition and can also foster significant new ventures.*
 - c. *The department should try to move towards a consolidation of its doctoral programs but maintain tracks (rather than programs) for students with specific interests.*
 - d. *The department should continue its wonderful work at the undergraduate level; the programs are clearly flourishing.*

Action Step 1.1: The Chair will assign the task of re-writing the Department's mission, vision and goals statements to a faculty group early in 2009 with the goal of bringing revised statements to the full faculty for consideration early in Fall 2009. The comments and recommendations of the PRT should be incorporated into these statements with the caveat that the recommendation in 1.c needs qualification (see Section 2.1 in Curriculum below). The revised vision statement should include a phrase in which we aspire to "becoming an outstanding, top tier, nationally recognized PhD-granting department".

2. Curriculum

PRT Recommendations:

1. *The Department of Geography should try to focus its graduate programs by merging the three doctoral programs.*
 - a. *The department has three separate doctoral programs and has discussed adding another. These are important, but detract somewhat from the overall goals. It is possible that they inhibit some students from applying to Texas State because they perceive that the programs do not fit their needs.*
 - b. *The review team recognizes the difficulties of such an undertaking given the structure of academic programs in the Texas systems. However, it may be contingent upon central administration to move such programs forward as Texas State evolves into a recognized first tier research institution.*
2. *The Department of Geography should continue to develop its field courses and encourage students to gain hands-on experience.*
3. *The Department of Geography should continue to participate in and support Study Abroad initiatives.*
4. *The Department of Geography should evaluate its quantitative-based courses and reassess what level of statistical expertise might be appropriate.*

Comments on 2.1: The Department recognizes that a PhD program designation that represents all of the topical areas under the umbrella of the discipline of geography may eventually be a necessary accoutrement for advancement to top tier status. However, there is strong justification to retain separate Environmental Geography, Geographic Education and Geographic Information Science doctoral programs for some time into the future, given the strong reputation that the Department has developed in these areas.

Action Step 2.1: Over the next 5-year APR period, the Department will examine the advisability and monitor the feasibility of expanding our doctoral offerings to encompass all subfields of the discipline.

Action Step 2.2: The Department will continue to strongly support its field courses and hands-on experiences. This is a current and ongoing initiative for departmental programs at all levels: undergraduate, Master's and PhD.

Action Step 2.3: The Department will encourage faculty and student participation in Study Abroad activities and encourage the development of new such opportunities. This is a current and ongoing initiative for departmental programs at all levels: undergraduate, Master's and PhD.

Action Step 2.4: The Chair will assign the task of reviewing our undergraduate and graduate quantitative methods courses to an ad-hoc faculty group early in 2009 with the goal of reporting findings to the Chair by early in Fall 2009, in time for potential curricular action (if needed) by the Undergraduate and Graduate Committees by the end of Fall 2009. In addition, the Department will initially offer, on an experimental basis, a graduate-level course involving Qualitative Methods in Geography during Fall 2009.

Additional comments on the Curriculum section of the PRT report:

The Department does offer courses in advanced cultural geography (e.g. American Ethnic Geography; Geography of the Southwest; various regional courses) and will continue to do so as student interest dictates.

The PRT expressed concern that we may be offering too many programs. It should be noted that at least three of our subfield undergraduate majors are larger than the entire size of the undergraduate major program in many peer geography departments. In addition to having a vision aspiring to become a top tier PhD-granting department, in the discussion and vision and goals, the PRT encourages us to be “a leader in applied geography”. This has been a major historical strength of the Department and explains the large size and success of the undergraduate program as well as the Master of Applied Geography program. For example, our large number of undergraduate majors reflect the various applied fields that we can provide and, arguably, represent a significant attractive feature of our degree programs at the undergraduate and Master’s levels.

While the Department is now responsible for the geology curriculum on campus, which involves inclusion in the science component of general education, we believe that it is imperative that we ensure that the earth sciences are well-represented in the science general education program. As a complement to our geology offerings, this will ensure that the earth sciences are appropriately represented in general education, while also providing the department with additional access to lower-division students for undergraduate major recruitment.

Action Step 2.5: The Department’s Undergraduate and Graduate Committees will continue to closely monitor the various major, minor and certificate programs offered by the Department with the view of identifying declining programs if and when appropriate. In addition, the Undergraduate and Graduate Committees (and faculty as a whole) will continue to closely monitor trends in the discipline with a view of recommending revisions to existing programs or opportunities for new programs. This is a current and ongoing initiative.

Action Step 2.6: The Department is in the process of proposing the inclusion of GEO 1305/1105 Meteorology as an acceptable course within the science component of the University’s general education program. Consideration by the general education council is scheduled for January 2009.

3. Teaching and Learning Effectiveness

PRT recommendations:

1. *The Department of Geography has been very effective in teaching and this should be recognized in annual evaluations. This applies to all educational levels, undergraduate, masters' and doctoral students.*
2. *The graduation of first-class doctoral students is fundamental to the success of doctoral departments and should be recognized in annual evaluations.*
3. *Master's students can be demanding on one's time, but this is still an important mission of the department. Once again, those faculty members working with master's students should be rewarded.*

Action Step 3.1: While current annual evaluation procedures include student course evaluations at all levels as well as recognition through our completion points concept for the successful completion of graduate student advisees, one of the items that the Evaluation Committee was charged with (by the Chair) on September 3, 2008 involved teaching evaluation. A report and/or recommendation is anticipated during 2009.

Comment on 3.2: As indicated above, the current annual evaluation procedures recognize the successful completion of doctoral students both as PhD advisor and for serving on PhD student committees.

Action Step 3.3: As indicated above, the current annual evaluation procedures recognize the successful completion of Master's students. On December 12, 2008, the faculty passed a policy to add credit for service on completed Master's degree committees as an addition to the existing credit for service as Master's advisor.

4. Faculty Contributions, focusing on indicators of excellence in teaching, research and scholarship

PRT recommendations:

1. *The Department of Geography should seek to enhance external funding to support research activities.*
 - a. *Research in doctoral departments should be funded to a degree by external money from such agencies as the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, or the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as other federal sources and in-state agencies.*

- b. *The faculty should be expected to seek external funding and be held accountable at pre-tenure and tenure decisions.*
 - c. *External funding will help support quality graduate students and further enhance applications from outside Texas.*
 - d. *Integration and interdisciplinary initiatives with other units on campus and elsewhere will further enhance external funding.*
2. *The Department of Geography should encourage faculty (and students) to publish widely and focus on top-tier peer-reviewed academic journals. This activity should be rewarded in merit pay.*
 3. *The Department of Geography should nominate faculty for more awards outside the institution; there are many viable candidates for such awards.*
 4. *The Department of Geography should be authorized to replace upcoming faculty retirements with highly productive junior faculty. In addition, we urge that the College provide the department with resources to hire 2-3 non-tenure track faculty members – either lecturers or instructors to ensure that—that undergraduate instruction is not compromised.*
 5. *The Centers (Grosvenor Center, Lovell Center and the GIScience Center) within the department can and should play a greater role in fostering research and grant activity. We urge that the role of these Centers in advancing scholarship and grants activity be discussed by all faculty members and there be a collective agreement on their mission. There should also be a clear statement of deliverables for each Center against which should be the basis for resource allocations.*

Comments on 4.1: Several faculty members have recently been awarded or made applications for high-profile federal competitive grants (e.g. NSF grant on the Holocaust) and several faculty members are involved with joint funded research projects such as with colleagues in Biology, Criminal Justice or through the River Systems Institute. Some faculty members currently collaborate on grants with colleagues at other PhD-granting institutions and other organizations such as the Association of American Geographers.

Action Step 4.1: One of the items that the Evaluation Committee was charged with (by the Chair) on September 3, 2008 involved the issue of recognition of grants. On December 12, 2008, the faculty passed a new “grants credit” policy as part of the Department’s Procedures for Annual Faculty Review, which will go into effect for the 2009 calendar year review period.

Comments on 4.2: It should be noted that some of our nationally-recognized senior faculty members have stellar publications records in top-tier academic journals. Our junior faculty members have been mentored by the Chair and colleagues to target top-tier outlets for their scholarly publications.

Action Step 4.2: Two of the items that the Evaluation Committee was charged with (by the Chair) on September 3, 2008 involved the issue of merit points for scholarship and scholarly

books. A report and/or recommendation is anticipated during 2009. The Committee is also considering the issue of the quality of published outlets (i.e. top tier journals). These issues will also be extended into a discussion of promotion and tenure criteria during 2009 or 2010.

Action Step 4.3: While noting the significant past departmental success with NCGE and other teaching awards, as well as success within AAG specialty groups for research awards, the Chair in collaboration with faculty colleagues will investigate national award opportunities and encourage nominations as appropriate. This endeavor will be an ongoing initiative.

Comments on 4.4: The Department appreciates the importance of this recommendation. See Comments on 6.5 and Action Step 6.5 in the Section 6 on Program Allocations and Resources.

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5. Student Accomplishments

PRT Recommendations:

1. *The Department of Geography should seek to further raise the quality of its programs so that it becomes not only the largest geography department but also one of the best.*
 - a. *To the department's credit, the quality of students has risen over the years and the students at both graduate and undergraduate levels have found gainful employment. We would like to see the department capitalize on this by showcasing its students.*
 - b. *The department should consider setting a higher grade point average for admittance into the geography graduate program.*
 - c. *The department should consider setting higher standards for admittance to the doctoral program. This is not to argue that GRE scores are to be the main determinant of admittance, but that full portfolios are considered.*
 - d. *The department should continue to actively recruit students from outside Texas.*
2. *The department should encourage students to seek external funding to support their research activities.*
3. *The department should maintain its high level of interaction with alumni. This association has been highly successful and could be emulated by other departments (both internal to Texas State and external).*

Comments on 5.1: Regarding item 5.1.c., it should be noted that full portfolios for applicants to the doctoral program are already considered.

Note that in the Executive Summary (page 2 of the PRT report), the following phrasing related to Recommendation 5.1 is used: “The Department of Geography should seek to cap the size of its graduate program and focus on quality ...” (underlining added). It should be noted that the current University emphasis is on growth of graduate programs and new resources are being focused on such growing programs. The Department already strongly supports student participation at national meetings such as the AAG with one of the largest student presence at recent meetings. Numerous students have won awards at such professional meetings. Thus, we feel that we do show-case our students substantially.

The Department’s number of undergraduate majors has remained in a relatively stable range (by design) since 2001 with approximately 450-500 majors, partially as a result of Geography’s higher GPA requirements compared to the Texas State University minimum standard. However, in other respects, we have grown considerably.

Since 2001, the number of Geography plus NHT minors has approximately doubled from 100 to 200. The recent addition of geology to our responsibilities has added over 70 additional minors.

Undergraduate SCH generation has risen by about 15% since 2001, with most of this growth in upper division courses (up 25% primarily due to growth in minors and other majors taking geography courses such as the University’s growing International Studies Major). Graduate SCH generation has risen considerably since 2001 being up about 60%. The number of graduate Geography majors is also up by about 60% during this time period, including a doubling at the PhD level.

Action Step 5.1: The Graduate Committee will examine the viability of raising admission standards for our graduate programs in the light of desiring to raise the quality of our programs (which is indeed an important goal), while recognizing the institutional directive to at least retain (if not modestly grow) graduate student enrollment. Higher admission standards for the PhD program should be examined in particular. The Graduate Committee will be charged with reviewing this issue and reporting to the Chair and faculty during calendar year 2009.

The Department will continue its efforts to increase the number of out-of-state students through such efforts as the Texas State University-San Marcos reception at the annual AAG meetings, formal and informal contacts with other departments, and an informative entry in the annual Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas directory published by the AAG.

Action Step 5.2: Graduate student advisors will be encouraged to work with their students to secure external funding for their research work. This will be an ongoing initiative.

Action Step 5.3: The Department will continue its Departmental Newsletter, ongoing revisions of the Alumni Business Card Directory, highly successful Annual Alumni reunion and Student Celebration, and explore electronic methods of reaching out to alumni (e.g. experimenting with venues such as an Alumni Facebook site).

6. Program Allocations and Resources

PRT Recommendations:

- 1. The Department of Geography is well placed regarding resources, but should seek more space when the opportunity arises. There is a need for offices and laboratories, particularly now that geology has been subsumed within the academic unit.*
- 2. The Department of Geography should encourage students to apply for external funding to support their research.*
- 3. The Department of Geography should assess access issues for its laboratories.*
- 4. The Department should examine the roles and functions of its centers as noted above.*
- 5. New faculty hires will be necessary to support the development of the programs. As noted above, positions made vacant by retirements should be filled by highly productive junior faculty. The hire of 2-3 non-tenure faculty will be also necessary to maintain the high quality of its undergraduate programs while enhancing research productivity.*

Action Step 6.1: The Department does need more office space for faculty, graduate students and research projects (including for the departmental Centers). One additional teaching lab may be needed within the next five years especially if our meteorology initiative for science general education is successful. The anticipated time-line for acquiring additional space corresponds to the move of the Department of Political Science from the Evans Liberal Arts building into a newly constructed academic building (anticipated approximately 2012).

Comment on 6.2: See Action Step 5.2.

Comments on 6.3: All teaching computer labs are “open”: Monday – Thursday from 8 a.m.–9 p.m.; Friday from 8 a.m.–5 p.m.; and Saturday 12 noon-5 p.m. except during regularly scheduled class times. Graduate students who are undertaking thesis or dissertation research have individual key access to the research labs upon recommendation of their advisors. Such access is continually monitored.

Comments on 6.4: The Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education has a well-established mission and an extremely active ongoing agenda. This center is well-funded through endowment sources, ongoing allocations from the National Geographic Society, and significant ongoing grant acquisitions.

The James and Marilyn Lovell Center for Environmental Geography and Hazards Research serves as an outlet for scholarly interaction but does not currently have a clear mission and purpose. While the Texas Center for Geographic Information Science has served as a significant platform for research proposals and activity, its future direction is also under consideration.

Action Step 6.4: During 2009, the Chair will form two faculty task forces (one for the Lovell Center and one for the GIScience Center) to address the issues of future mission, direction and deliverables as well as future leadership for each of these Centers. These task forces will submit reports by sometime during the 2010-11 academic year.

Comments on 6.5: In order to proceed towards the goals recommended by the PRT, it will be necessary to replace retiring faculty members with PhD-Core productive junior faculty members. However, it is very important to note that some anticipated near-term retiring faculty members currently generate very large SCH especially at the undergraduate level. Recommendation 1.4 above states that the "... department should continue its wonderful work at the undergraduate level; the programs are clearly flourishing". We strongly support this statement. In order to continue this wonderful work at the undergraduate level, enhance the quality of our graduate programs, elevate grant activity and the quality of scholarly publications, and recognize the significant SCH growth we have encountered in recent years (especially at the graduate and upper division undergraduate levels), we strongly agree with the PRT observation that we need new faculty hires.

While the PRT indicates that it may be useful to have 2-3 new net gain lecturer hires, it should be noted that new Assistant Professor lines do not cost significantly more – and they have the advantage of contributing to both the undergraduate and graduate programs. It is recognized that garnering net new positions will be highly competitive among departments within the University. We argue that our recent SCH and graduate majors' growth justifies our consideration.

Additionally, we propose that net new positions should especially be awarded to Geography when high-salaried retirements occur and thus such expansion can be accomplished through our internal budget – i.e. a two-for-one deal. For example, one individual who is anticipated for retirement in 2009 plays a huge role in SCH generation at the undergraduate level. The salary savings from this retirement will be sufficient to fund two tenure-track Assistant Professor positions. Both of these individuals could participate in introductory teaching as well as upper level undergraduate courses, and fully participate in the graduate programs including at the PhD level. This scenario would provide the needed support for our undergraduate needs, plus make a significant contribution to the graduate programs and grant/scholarship initiatives.

Action Step 6.5a: During the next five years, the Department will seek to replace all retirements with PhD-Core appointments. In some high-salaried cases, we will seek a "two-for-one" deal (i.e. two new Assistant Professor lines for one senior retiree), thus growing our faculty strength from within our current budget. During 2009, the Department will request such a two-for-one replacement for one specific anticipated retirement case.

Action Step 6.5b: For Fall 2009, the Department has already requested that the Dean recommend one net new Senior Lecturer position in recognition of our significant SCH increases since 2001.