

**TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY  
ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW (September 2008)**

**Program Review Team**

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**Executive Summary**

The Texas State Department of Geography is a very strong academic unit, with exceptional leadership, that contributes substantially to the goals and aspirations of Texas State University. It has been a role model for a number of years, especially in furthering graduate programs, and has consistently demonstrated a commitment to quality education at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The review team was impressed with the dedication of faculty and staff alike and the students' satisfaction with their programs. Thus, the remarks and criticisms made in this report should be viewed in the light of this overall favorable report; the recommendations are designed to help move the department to the next level consistent with the mission of Texas State University. The recommendations are discussed in detail in the report.

**Recommendations:**

- The Department of Geography should seek to enhance external funding to support research activities.
  - *In order for the department to establish a reputation for its doctoral programs, faculty need to compete aggressively for extramural funding from agencies such as the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as other federal sources and in-state agencies. This type of external funding will help attract and support top notch graduate students, nationally and create a culture of research.*
  - *The department should encourage grantsmanship by placing a higher weight to this activity in annual merit reviews and other incentives.*
  - *Integration and interdisciplinary initiatives with other units on campus and elsewhere will further enhance external funding.*
  - *The review team recognizes that an increase in the department's extramural funding will also require institutional changes, including in staffing and support available in the Sponsored Program office, and revised promotion and tenure guidelines that emphasize research and grantsmanship.*
  
- The Department of Geography should continue to strengthen its research and scholarship activities.
  - *The review team recommends the Department (and Institution) place greater weight on publishing in top-tier, national and international journals. Such activity will build on the work already being published in regional journals and bring greater recognition to the department.*

- *Promotion and tenure guidelines should be amended to reflect this emphasis. It has been suggested that the Department of Geography already maintains standards for promotion and tenure that are higher than most units within Texas State University; if the University is serious about promoting research initiatives then such guidelines should be addressed at the institutional level.*
- The Department of Geography should substitute the separate tracks in its doctoral programs by a single Ph.D. program in Geography.
  - *The department has three separate doctoral programs and has discussed adding another. We believe that having separate Ph.D. tracks work against building a strong Ph.D. program for a number of reasons. (i) Tracks project a “vocational” rather than a scholarly orientation; (ii) tracks tend to partition and fragment inquiry when doctoral students should be exploring the innovative space at the intersections of fields and disciplines; and (iii) tracks may inhibit some students from applying to Texas State because they perceive that the programs do not fit their needs.*
  - *The review team recognizes that doctoral tracks were necessary to have the program approved at the state level. However, it is critical to recognize the limitations they pose to building a top- tier Ph.D. program.*
- The Department of Geography should seek to cap the size of its graduate program and focus on quality so that it is recognized not just for being the largest geography department but also one of the best.
  - *To the department’s credit, the quality of students has risen over the years and the students at both graduate and undergraduate levels have been placed in excellent positions. We would like to see the department capitalize on this by showcasing the high quality of its students.*
  - *The department should consider setting a higher grade point average for admittance into the geography graduate program.*
  - *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.*
  - *The current graduate student body is made up of a large proportion of students with undergraduate degrees from Texas State. We are encouraged to see that this share has been declining over time because it signals that the department is attracting students from a larger market. These students will bring new ideas and experiences and enhance the intellectual vibrancy of the department. The department should continue to actively recruit students from outside Texas.*

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ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW**

**Introduction**

The program review team met on campus for the official site visit for two days (September 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> 2008) to review the Department of Geography and its programs. The review team was asked to address specifically: (1) departmental vision, mission and goals; (2) curriculum; (3) teaching and learning effectiveness; (4) faculty contributions, focusing on indicators of excellence in teaching, research and scholarship; (5) student accomplishments; and (6) program allocations and resources. In addition, at the behest of the provost, the team was asked to consider the appropriateness of the focus of the department. This report addresses each of these points and also makes a series of recommendations on improvements to the program. In this report, we have tried not to repeat information that is in the internal *Academic Program Review Self-Study Report*, except where emphasis was deemed appropriate.

During the two days, the review team met formally with Ann Marie Ellis (Dean of Liberal Arts), Mike Willoughby (Dean of the Graduate School), Bill Covington (Associate Vice President for Research), Perry Moore (Provost) and his staff, Phil Suckling (Chair, Department of Geography), most of the faculty members in the Department of Geography in various groups, including those associated with the undergraduate programs, the graduate programs and the three centers (Grosvenor Center, Lovell Center and the GIScience Center), Department of Geography Staff, a number of graduate students, and a selection of undergraduate students. In addition, the review team held an exit meeting with department faculty at the end of the two days.

**1. DEPARTMENTAL VISION, MISSION AND GOALS**

The Department of Geography is a very strong academic unit that contributes substantially to the goals and aspirations of Texas State University. Texas State University is seeking to be recognized as an emerging research university in Texas. As the first campus program offering the doctorate, the Department of Geography is a leader and role model in the university.

Being the first unit at Texas State University to offer the doctoral degree has come with both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the department has been able to garner the necessary resources to build its faculty and its facilities. The department is well known and respected in the university which is a plus for the faculty and students and also for the discipline of geography. On the negative side, the department has had the challenge of building a doctoral/research program in the absence of the institutional support structures that other doctoral programs take for granted, e.g. a strong sponsored program office, promotion and tenure guidelines that emphasize research and grantsmanship, etc. (We were gratified to see, however, that the administration is making a concerted effort to build these structures.) A more significant disadvantage is that geography faculty and students do not yet have the opportunity to work with faculty and students in other strong doctoral programs. Geography, in particular, relies greatly on faculty in “cognate fields” to serve on doctoral student committees, to offer seminars that geography students can take, and to contribute to multidisciplinary research teams. This is changing as Texas State evolves into a comprehensive, research based institution. Geography has been an important part of this evolution.

## **Vision and Goals**

The department states that its vision and goals are to *“continue to strive to have the largest and finest undergraduate geography program in the nation, to lead the discipline with innovative applied work as exemplified by its Master of Applied Geography program and to strive for national recognition within its research degrees (Master of Science and Ph.D. degree programs) including significant faculty scholarship and grant activity.”* It is clear that the department has already met some of these goals; it is the largest geography department in the nation (we believe) and certainly serves a large student population at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It should be noted that the department has seven major programs and three minors at the undergraduate level, five master’s level programs and three doctoral level programs. In addition, there are two certificates.

This level of activity raises concerns over the focus of the department and its programs and its commitment to service activities. The review team looked specifically at the doctoral programs in terms of departmental focus and was somewhat concerned with the diversity of programs. It was felt that while the three programs may attract some students there could be some negative spin-off as others may not see themselves as fitting in. During discussions, it was apparent that many students, once admitted, were interpreting the programs a little more broadly than the descriptions. The team fully understood the rationale for the separate programs, but it may be time for the central administration to begin looking at ways to accommodate a wider perspective at the state level. Geography would benefit from a doctoral degree in geography (or applied geography). Once again, this may demonstrate the importance of the leadership role within geography in taking Texas State to the next level.

The service component is also important both to the institution and the department and should not be lost in any change, especially since the undergraduate programs often feeds into the graduate programs. However, the review team felt that the department is now sufficiently mature and academically established that a move towards higher quality and not just quantity is called for. The department may have reached an optimum size, in terms of students, and hence should increasingly focus its efforts on raising academic standards.

The department meets other goals as well. It is recognized for its applied work at the master’s level with faculty members and students regularly participating in the Applied Geography Conferences. It has not yet achieved national recognition with its research degrees, although it should be stressed that its graduates are increasingly finding employment at both research universities and other educational institutions and agencies. This recognition may only be a short step away. The contribution of faculty members within the department to “significant faculty scholarship” and to “grant activity” is more mixed and raised a few concerns with the review team. These areas are addressed below.

The review team would like to see the department develop new goals that include such visions as *“becoming an outstanding, top tier, nationally recognized PhD-granting department,”* and to be *“a leader in applied geography.”* These goals may seem to be distant at this stage, since there are many other institutions battling to join that group. It will certainly be a challenge, but the “largest” should also aspire to be “one of the best.” A goal such as this galvanizes department faculty, staff and students alike in a common cause that will inspire effort that collectively moves the department to this next level. We see such goals as attainable as higher education practices evolve across the nation.

## **Mission**

The department’s stated mission includes, among other goals, *“to provide its students with educational experiences of the highest quality,”* to *“conduct vital research that produces valuable publications,”* and

to be committed to “*outstanding teaching and scholarly activities...*” The department is clearly meeting this mission in many ways. The programs for the most part appear to be strong (see details below); the undergraduates are finding employment in respectable organizations and agencies, as too are the graduate students. It is a reflection of the quality of the educational programs that students have been so successful. The vital research and valuable publications is satisfactory but could be further enhanced and encouraged as the department moves forward.

### **Recommendations**

- The Department of Geography should re-write its mission, vision and goals statements to reflect its recent growth and new aspirations.
  - *The department should seek to be a top tier, nationally recognized PhD-granting department.*
  - *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.*
  - *The department should try to move towards a consolidation of its doctoral programs but maintain tracks (rather than programs) for students with specific interests.*
  - *The department should continue its wonderful work at the undergraduate level; the programs are clearly flourishing.*

## **2. CURRICULUM**

The Department of Geography has a broad curriculum that is balanced and well organized to meet the needs of students. This is true for all academic levels, and the various program curricula compare favorably with other geography departments. Students are required to select specific tracks to further their careers and have a number of courses from which to select and organize their individual programs. In general, students were very satisfied with the geography programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

A particular strength of the department is its field work. Many geography departments have abandoned taking undergraduate students into the field because of time and resource issues, as well as legal constraints in terms of insurance. The Texas State department has been successful in overcoming these obstacles and pursues many successful field-oriented courses. In addition, it is a strong supporter and contributor to Study Abroad programs. In this respect, the geography department is way ahead of many other departments across the country.

Some undergraduates expressed a concern that cultural geography was not covered as well as they might like and there may be a weakness in faculty interests in this area. Given the size of the department this is somewhat of a surprise. At the graduate level, the review team found some issues with quantitative methods, especially skills related to spatial statistics. In some areas, more formal instruction might be helpful. Every graduate student in the program should be competent in an appropriate level of statistical analysis and research ability. Those students in GIScience may be better prepared than others. At the same time, a few students called for a course in qualitative methods. (Note, much of geographical research now involves mixed method approaches involving triangulation of data including qualitative, quantitative and archival work). Overall, however, the department seems to pay careful attention to balancing its curricular offerings.

The review team was concerned that the department might be trying to offer too many programs. The department has seven undergraduate major programs and three minors, five masters’ level programs

and three doctoral level programs. In addition, there are two certificates. Whereas the presence of multiple tracks is an advantage at the undergraduate and possibly at the Master's level, it is not recommended at the Ph.D. level for the reasons noted earlier.

### **Recommendations**

- The Department of Geography should try to focus its graduate programs by merging the three doctoral programs.
  - *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.*
  - *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.*
- The Department of Geography should continue to develop its field courses and encourage students to gain hands-on experience.
- The Department of Geography should continue to participate in and support Study Abroad initiatives.
- The Department of Geography should evaluate its quantitative-based courses and reassess what level of statistical expertise might be appropriate.

### **3. TEACHING AND LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS**

While the review team could not use the outcomes assessments to review teaching and learning effectiveness, since these have only recently been implemented, it is clear that the department has some highly successful educational programs. This success is, in part, reflected in the placement of students after graduation. At the undergraduate level, students have responded well and usually find gainful employment in their areas of expertise. This also applies at the graduate masters' level. The booklet, "*Careers/Jobs in Geography: Business Cards of Department Graduates*" demonstrates this success. (One of the review team has tried to implement a similar strategy at his institution, but was unsuccessful) In interviews with students, especially the undergraduates, the universal response to questions about the primary strength of the department and programs was the quality of the faculty members.

At the doctoral level there are signs that the program is now established and turning out some top quality graduates. Some of these have found positions at research-based institutions and others at comprehensive universities, which will add to the overall reputation of Texas State University. To the department's and major professors' credit, two doctoral students have already won the prestigious J. Warren Nystrom Award for best doctoral dissertation presented annually by the Association of American Geographers. In many ways, the department is enhancing the reputation of the institution by contributing to the number of graduate students moving through the system.

It is noticeable that several faculty members have been particularly productive in graduating doctoral students. A quick count shows that 17 faculty members have served successfully as major professors; Butler has graduated 7, Dixon 5, Boehm 4 and Stea 4. The through flow of graduates has also picked up over the last few years. In the first four years there were 13 graduates while 28 graduated over the last four years. It is anticipated that as the recently hired junior faculty become more established the high graduation rate will continue.

## **Recommendations**

- 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.
- The graduation of first-class doctoral students is fundamental to the success of doctoral departments and should be recognized in annual evaluations.
- 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.

## **4. FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS, FOCUSING ON INDICATORS OF EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP**

The review team was impressed with the dedication of faculty and staff alike and the students' satisfaction with their programs. Most of the faculty are fully engaged with their students and have reasonably active research agendas. In all institutions, there is variability in the contributions made by faculty members to research, teaching and service. A review of the curriculum vitae of individual faculty members reveals that virtually all are contributing to the success of the department in one way or another. There is a reasonably high level of research activity in the form of published articles, strong commitments to teaching, and faculty service on a number of committees throughout the institution.

The review team would like to see greater emphasis on publications in top-tier, peer-reviewed journals. As a doctoral degree department this is essential to ensure the ongoing success of the department. Publishing in second and third tier journals, as well as in the grey literature, is certainly valuable, but it is through articles published in the leading geography journals (and associated journals) that real kudos will come to the program. This activity will also foster applications for graduate school from a wider audience as students seek to work with known scholars.

Many of the faculty members in the department have won a number of awards in teaching and research including national level teaching awards from the NCGE . This is to be commended and encouraged. However, many of these are within the institution; once again the review team would like to see some of these faculty nominated for awards within the discipline.

If there is a weakness in the faculty members' contributions to the success of the department, it is in external funding for research. The amount of money awarded to the department is somewhat limited given its size. As a doctoral department it should be seeking far more research grants that can help it support its students. In some ways, the success the department has had in obtaining large endowments is a two-edged sword. The endowments support considerable work, but at the same time appear to discourage seeking external funding. On the other hand, over the years geography has received more than the usual share of indirect cost recovery money (grant overheads) as incentives to write proposals. A couple of faculty members cited the lack of support within the institution in developing grant proposals as reasons for not seeking external money. This may have been addressed in recent years; the department culture towards this activity now needs to change. The department should grow its research base in line with the goals of the institution.

Mentorship within the department appears to be strong and should be encouraged. Junior faculty members work closely with senior faculty and this certainly enhances intra-departmental collegiality. By developing clear goals and objectives, then, there can be a gradual change in the culture of the department to emphasize research while not overlooking the importance of teaching.

The other challenges facing the department, in this regard, are forthcoming retirements. As senior faculty leave, so the face of the department will change. Junior faculty members are inevitably pressured to publish and in this movement, sometimes the educational mission, especially at the undergraduate level, can be lost. It is important that the department does not lose these strengths, but continues to build on them. The review team, therefore, recommends that the department consider future hires to include at least one senior lecturer level; a person who is committed to teaching and education rather than the traditional research and teaching roles. The mix of “research” and “teaching” faculty is something with which many other institutions are struggling. The review team does not want the Department of Geography to weaken its undergraduate and master’s level program at the expense of the doctoral program.

### **Recommendations**

- The Department of Geography should seek to enhance external funding to support research activities.
  - *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.*
  - *The faculty should be expected to seek external funding and be held accountable at pre-tenure and tenure decisions.*
  - *External funding will help support quality graduate students and further enhance applications from outside Texas.*
  - *Integration and interdisciplinary initiatives with other units on campus and elsewhere will further enhance external funding.*
- 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.
- The Department of Geography should nominate faculty for more awards outside the institution; there are many viable candidates for such awards.
- 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.
- 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.

### **5. STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

As demonstrated by the Career/Jobs in Geography booklet, students have been most successful in finding employment. This applies to undergraduates and graduate students. Students have also received awards and some funding. However, it is in this respect that the success of the endowments within the department has worked against the unit. There are so many awards that students do not have to find funding to support their research. Consequently, it appears that very few have applied to the National Science Foundation for grants to support their dissertation work.

While the quality of students is good and appears to have been increasing over the years, the review team would like to see the department pursue this as a major goal in the coming years. It is time for the department to consolidate; it is already large enough and can now afford the luxury of focusing on developing its quality in several areas.

Recruitment of students is improving. As the chair indicated at the undergraduate level, the department is trying to keep the numbers below 500. This has been accomplished by raising standards, a move the review team sees as a positive. Recruitment at the master's level is more challenging if one considers spatial diversity. Approximately, 88 percent of students come from Texas schools and 51 percent earned their undergraduate degree at Texas State University (32% graduated from the geography program). This leads to two concerns: (1) it is clear that the undergraduate program in geography and others on campus are critical feeder units for graduate students in geography; and (2) there is a low level of students from outside Texas in the program. Thus, while maintaining a strong undergraduate program is of paramount importance, attracting students from elsewhere is also critical.

At the doctoral level, recruitment shows greater diversity. Of the 63 current doctoral students, 35 percent were from non-Texas institutions, 14 percent were from overseas and only 37 percent hailed from Texas State University. These students came from 29 different US institutions.

#### **Recommendations**

- 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.
  - *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 show-casing its students.*
  - *The department should consider setting a higher grade point average for admittance into the geography graduate program.*
  - *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.*
  - *The department should continue to actively recruit students from outside Texas.*
- The department should encourage students to seek external funding to support their research activities.
- 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).

#### **6. PROGRAM ALLOCATIONS AND RESOURCES**

The department seems to be well-placed regarding resources and space. While there are difficulties fitting everyone into offices, the department has been creative in adding offices and desk space for graduate students. The one area of need is office space for faculty – several faculty members have offices that are extremely cramped. We recommend that additional space be made available for this purpose as soon as deemed possible.

Financially, the department is well-managed and works within its budget. It is helped by the very large endowments that have been made to the department; this is a credit to the faculty and staff who have actively sought support. This money supports a large number of graduate students in the research and

attendance/participation at academic meetings. The disadvantage of this, as noted above, is that it appears to discourage the writing of grant proposals especially at the doctoral level.

The inclusion of the geology minor within the department has added to its responsibilities. The review team believes that this is good addition and will gradually support the mission of both the department and institution. A large university like Texas State should have geology within its curriculum and research endeavors. However, this has increased the Department of Geography's responsibilities and put demands on laboratory space.

Access to the computer laboratories within the department was raised by some students as a problem, especially during the evenings and on weekends. It is customary in most research universities for graduate students to have a 24/7 access to computer labs through an electronic key card access which eliminates the need for round the clock staffing without compromising security. We urge that such a system be installed.

The departmental support staff members are professional and fully integrated into the mission of the department. They are held in high regard by faculty and students and obviously contribute substantially to the success of the department. The department appears to have enough support in this area, but this may be a reflection of how well staff members work together.

The department also has three research/service centers. The Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education has been highly successful in many ways, supporting research and teaching and has been involved in several national conferences. Similarly, the Texas Center for Geographic Information Science has been very active and instrumental in supporting research activities. The James and Marilyn Lovell Center for Environmental Geography and Hazards Research seems to have slipped somewhat from its earlier levels. This center has little money and resources apart from space and needs to be revitalized.

### **Recommendations**

- 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.
- The Department of Geography should encourage students to apply for external funding to support their research.
- The Department of Geography should assess access issues for its laboratories.
- The Department should examine the roles and functions of its centers as noted above.
- 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.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Department of Geography at Texas State University is playing a critical role in the university's transition from a Masters' level institution to an emerging research university. Although there are clear challenges and areas for improvement, the review team was impressed by the strengths of the department's programs and the quality of faculty, staff and students. The challenges ahead for the department reflect those faced by the university: how best to spearhead an institutional change that moves beyond the local and regional mission of educating students in applied areas designed around the needs of business, industry, and government to an academic culture focused around research,

discovery, and grantsmanship. This change will not come overnight, but the review team is confident that the department is on the right track in making the shift and will help Texas State achieve its goal to be designated as a research university.

*Submitted November 11, 2008*