

**California State University, Fullerton
Program Performance Review
Department of Geography and the Environment
External Review Report**

February, 10, 2023

Reviewers

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The Review Process

This document presents the report of the external review committee on the Department of Geography and the Environment at CSU Fullerton. The reviewers visited campus on February 7, 2023. We met with Dean Dr. Sheryl Fontaine and Associate Dean Dr. Jessica Stern as well as Department Chair Dr. Mark Drayse and incoming chair Dr. Trevis Matheus. We also had the opportunities to meet with faculty as well as lecturers and the department administrative team. We met with undergraduate and graduate students. It is based on these meetings and the Department produced self-study that we make the following comments and recommendations.

This report is divided into three sections. The first section commends the successes and strengths of the Department. Next the report examines the challenges and opportunities for growth the team identified. Finally, we make recommendations for the future development of the Department.

Commendations

The Department of Geography and the Environment must be commended on the overall level of satisfaction and pride its members expressed during our visit. Even after some of the most difficult years in higher education's history, the faculty, students, and staff still love this department and want to see it grow and flourish. Much of this has to do with the excellent leadership of Dr. Mark Drayse. During our visit, faculty and students spoke highly of Dr. Drayse as a chair, teacher, and colleague.

- Geography is a found major, very few students enter the university knowing they want to pursue a degree in Geography. For this reason, teaching at the lower division must be excellent to capture undeclared students and to poach from other majors or recruit double majors and minors. Community and local community college recruitment is also crucial to growth of a found major. The Department of Geography and the Environment is excellent at all of these techniques. Prior to the pandemic, Dr. Salim was working on an amazing community recruitment program and a former student teaching at a local community college was responsible for recruiting at least 1/8 of the students we met while on campus.

- The undergraduate course curriculum is consistent with other departments of geography and geography and the environment. The breadth and depth of the undergraduate curriculum being quite good. There is a slate of 100 level courses that provide introductions to general global geography, human geography studies of the natural environment and geospatial analysis. The 200 through 400 level courses build upon basics and introduce increasing specialization in substantive areas, such as population geography or geomorphology, regional studies such as California or China, and technical areas such as environmental remote sensing or applications of GIS. It is notable that students can also gain an introduction to urban planning in the upper division courses.
- Once in the department undergraduate students stick around and graduate on time. This is in part due to the strong sense of place and community fostered by the department. Almost all the undergraduate students we met were also part of the Geography Club and they attributed to the club a great deal of their sense of belonging in the department. There is also a well-used student lounge. Each time we passed through this space it was filled with students studying, talking, and snacking on the very reasonably priced foods supplied. Spaces like this are crucial to the development and maintenance of student relationships that help students get through their degrees with support from their colleagues and on time. The department knows this and supports the space.
- While not as successful a program in terms of student numbers or graduation rates, the graduate students we met were just as dedicated to the department. They all discussed the faculty as extremely approachable and always available. The faculty and their concern for their students was a selling point for the program for all the graduate students. One student had met faculty at the All Points of the Compass conference and knew immediately that she wanted to do her graduate degree at Fullerton.
- It is not just the students who get along well and have respect for each other the tenured/tenure track faculty do as well. It was a pleasure to see the faculty speak of each other and their work with such obvious esteem. While this was the case in our last visit as well, the nature of this comradery has changed. In our last visit we pointed out that “too much collegiality is actually a bad thing in that it can immobilize a department when action takes the backseat to diplomacy and consensus.” This appears to have changed. In

every meeting we had with faculty there were multiple and often conflicting ideas for change offered yet done so in collegial ways. There were often also interesting plans for growth offered, that clearly took time and effort to develop.

- Faculty morale is also very good considering we just came out of some very difficult teaching years. Rather than being burned out and at a loss for how to move forward, as many departments are, Geography faculty were full of ideas and energy. The faculty contribute commendably to the three pillars of teaching, research and service.
- Morale is also exceptionally high in the adjunct faculty. We met with three adjunct faculty, two teaching full 5/5 loads and one teaching a more unpredictable schedule (which was fine with her). All three genuinely appeared to enjoy teaching in the department. One was even an undergraduate and a graduate student in the Department of Geography and the Environment before returning to teach there. All three felt included in the department and not like second class citizens. The adjunct faculty are invited, but not required, to attend faculty meetings. This is a great way to include adjuncts in the running of a department and important if the department really wants to get a handle on how lower division GE classes are going as they are usually taught by adjuncts. The adjuncts mentioned several times that they felt they had a strong community of their own and really appreciated this.
- The support staff are engaged, efficient and highly valued by faculty and students. The staff expressed similar satisfaction with their positions. When asked what they would like changed about their positions or what they needed, they could not come up with any ideas. They are especially happy Dr. Matheus will be the next chair, a sentiment we heard repeated many times. Equipment replacement and campus technical support for the needs of the department's important GIS program also appears to be good at this time. Such support is critical to GIS programs.

Challenges

The continued sense of community and collegiality of the department through a pandemic that dispersed faculty and students is an impressive feat, but it was accompanied by the development of several new challenges.

- The biggest challenge is decreased enrollment and number of majors. This is, of course, not an issue particular to this Geography department, or to Geography as a discipline. Enrollment numbers decreased across the university during the pandemic. Geography will still need to address these losses and move their number of majors back up as well as the number of students they serve in general if they wish to hire.
- The master's program was affected particularly badly during the pandemic and its numbers plummeted. Retention is not optimal. The 500 level courses reflect a program with small student numbers - dictating a relatively small curriculum and the need for courses to be relatively general or take the form of seminars. In attracting current undergraduates into the master's program this may be a disincentive if students are strongly motivated by the desire to take more specialized or technical courses that go appreciably beyond their undergraduate experience. There has also been a serious issue with retention in the program with many students not finishing. These data sound contradictory to the rave reviews we heard from graduate students and point to some greater issues in the program that must be addressed. From our discussion with faculty, it appears the traditional thesis is often the stumbling block for many graduate students and should perhaps be rethought and more alternative options for completion offered. The graduate advisor, Dr. Taylor, also mentioned that he has little to no funds to offer incoming students and this makes the program much less competitive than others that can offer several years of funding to the one he can usually offer. Students faced with having to work outside the university likely find completing the masters a particular challenge. More graduate funding seems in order to stay competitive and improve graduation rates.
- Many we spoke with mentioned a fairly recent change in the department physical space as a possible cause in the decline in enrollment in the master's program. The Cal-Dendro Tree-Ring Lab for Dr. Matheus was placed in the old master's student office when he was hired. This space is next to the student lounge. When it was the masters student's offices there was a great deal of interaction between the graduate and undergraduate level students and that led to recruitment of many majors into the graduate program. It is very likely that without this daily interaction this internal pipeline to the graduate program has dried up.

- The lab space in question here is also inadequate for Dr. Matheus. He has a sanding room with no ventilation and no noise cancelation, so he and his students can only sand their specimens when the adjacent classrooms and lounge are not in use, thus greatly limiting when he can use his lab. A larger space would also benefit Dr. Matheus so he could teach a lab class, something the students requested. They would like more labs and more field trips. Dendrochronologists such as Dr. Matheus must archive their wood samples. In the not-too-distant future, Dr Matheus's lab will fill up with specimens if he does not find a larger space.
- Another aspect of recruitment and retention that came up several times during our visit was the availability of faculty on campus. The adjunct faculty mentioned their open-door policy and how they thought it would benefit the other faculty to try a similar approach. We also noted some faculty have not really come back to campus since the pandemic. This is the case in many departments and is never good for the students or the faculty. Students, particularly undeclared undergrads or those seeking double majors or minors, need to see faculty in person. For a robust departmental community to grow and continue, faculty must be present on campus. This is also necessary so that the faculty that do come in do not feel overworked in terms of supporting the community and taking on all of the day-to-day needs of the students.
- Currently the bulk of the department undergrad General Education enrollment is coming from Physical Geography classes. This is a change since we did our last review. In addition, Robert Voeks, who taught classes in environmental problems and natural vegetation, pertinent to physical geography students, has retired. These changes mandate more faculty to teach the classes and the department needs a new Physical Geographer. One with a competence in GIS would be good to help grow that program which now relies solely on the shoulders of Dr. Carroll.
- This hire would be a terrific opportunity to address one of the biggest challenges the department faces: a lack of diversity. Out of nine faculty only two identify as women and the number of faculty of color is very low as well. The faculty does not reflect our student population. A hire in Physical Geography would be an opportunity to increase diversity in the department.

Recommendations

- **Analyze and Strategize Student Recruitment and Retention** The department should analyze and strategize student recruitment in the post-pandemic environment. How can the department attract more undergraduate majors in general, and also how to attract more human geography majors, who often make up the majority of undergrads in geography programs? How can graduate students retention and graduation rates be improved? The economic challenges faced by graduate students, who often must work outside the university must be taken into account. That analysis and strategization should also consider how to improve the pipeline from the undergraduate program to the graduate program. Development of an action plan would be ideal.
- **Identify space for growth** The department has reached its potential in the space provided on their floor. It is time to find space, particularly appropriate lab space, somewhere else.
 - Dr. Matheus made it clear to us that he would be happy to move his lab off the 4th floor if it meant more space to grow and more appropriate facilities (exhaust fans for sanding room etc).
 - This move would provide the Dendro lab with the space it needs to grow and also the possibility for Dr. Matheus to teach a lab class, a format of class the undergraduates all requested be increased.
 - This move would open up the room in which the graduate students formerly had their offices and allow the cross-pollination of graduate students and undergraduates for better recruitment to the MA program.
- **Provide a new line for a hire in Physical Geography** The department needs a new Physical Geographer for several reasons.
 - With the retirement of Dr. Voeks, there is one less Physical Geographer on staff and a decreased capacity to maintain curricular breadth and depth.
 - The department is currently getting the majority of its GE seats from Physical Geography courses. This is a change as their GEs came from

Cultural and Human classes in the past. They need faculty to teach these classes and to serve the physical geography students in the upper level courses. A physical geographer with competence in geospatial analysis would be particularly useful in helping support growth in the expanding area of geography.

- Most importantly, this department needs diversity and this hire is an excellent opportunity to diversify the T/TT faculty. There are only two people who identify as women in the department and while this once reflected academia and Geography, it no longer represents either. The department needs faculty that represent our student body, especially if they want to recruit from our campus for major and MA students.

● Curriculum

- Students and faculty, including lecturers, are eager to implement more field trips. The pandemic obviously thwarted this vital aspect of geography, but it seems it is now appropriate to reintroduce and enhance field trip offerings. This experience may well help increase the flow of undergraduates to the graduate program.
- Joint graduate courses with geography departments at other CSU campuses, or joint courses with other units at Fullerton might be explored to make sure that there are sufficient students enrolled for a variety of graduate courses to be held. At Fullerton as one example, geography is, and can further grow with sufficient resources, as a hub for GIS education.
- Some undergraduate students suggested more education and knowledge about graduate school and career paths earlier in their curriculum. The department offers robust course offerings, especially given its size, though a course of this nature would seemingly provide an important component to their development. We notice that there is a Geographic Thought (GEOG 400A) which may provide a space for those conversations, if it doesn't already. This would avoid the drudgery of doing a program modification, appease the students and perhaps lead to greater enrollment in the graduate program. That in turn would help grow the graduate curriculum.