

TO: Mike Mahon
President and Vice Chancellor

DATE: March 30, 2017

FROM: Alan Siaroff
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

RE: Department of Geography Academic Quality Assurance Review

In accordance with the U of L *Academic Quality Assurance Policy and Process*, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee approved the review of the Department of Geography at its March 24, 2017 meeting.

The Self Study Committee for this review comprised Stefan Kienzle (Program Review Coordinator), Philip Bonnaventure, Craig Coburn, and Tom Johnston.

The review produced four documents:¹

1. *Department of Geography: Self-Study Report* (received August 26, 2016) – Self Study Report, developed by the Department of Geography Self Study Committee.
2. *External Review of the Department of Geography Academic Quality Assurance Process The University of Lethbridge* (received November 29, 2016) – by Michael Fox (Mount Allison University) and Dan Smith (University of Victoria) based on their site visit of October 18 - 19, 2016.
3. *Department of Geography: Response to the External Reviewers' Report* (received January 30, 2017) – response of the Self Study Committee to the external review.
4. *Dean's Response to the Quality Assurance Review, Department of Geography* (received March 14, 2017) – response to the review, written by Craig Cooper, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science.

¹ All documents are available upon request.

Self Study

The body of the Self Study Report noted several strengths of the Department of Geography:

- The Department has a strong research profile, is committed to liberal education, and its members participate actively in institutional governance.
- There is a collegial working environment in the Department.
- Faculty members in the Department cover a diverse range of research interests and teaching competencies.
- All Department faculty members have active research programs.
- Geography students regard faculty members as approachable and student-focused.
- The Department has links with other departments and with Lethbridge College.
- There are excellent technological resources, software, and IT support.
- Facilities in the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building (AWESB) are up-to-date.
- The Department has internationally-recognized strengths in the area of remote sensing. The major in Remote Sensing is the first program of its kind in Canada.
- From 2005 to 2014 there has been an almost five-fold increase in the number of Urban and Regional Studies majors.
- 67% of graduates found a professional position in their chosen field within six months after graduation.
- There are many programs in the Department that foster co-operative education.
- Members of the Department are active in the community.
- Many Geography courses are popular for fulfilling liberal education requirements.
- Undergraduate Geography students have the opportunity to participate in faculty research.
- Several faculty members in the Department have been nominated for teaching awards.

Weaknesses and challenges mentioned in the report were:

- There are gaps in the areas of human and physical geography.
- The number of faculty members in Geography has declined.
- While enrolments in Environmental Science (offered jointly by Geography and Biological Sciences) have risen steadily, enrolments in Geography have declined. From 2007-08 to 2014-15, enrolments in geography undergraduate courses have dropped 30%.
- Administrative support is provided by just one person and there is no dedicated technical support for the Department.
- For upper undergraduate teaching the AWESB has only two small teaching classrooms and one teaching lab.
- The Department's two teaching labs in University Hall are dated, and this building has no dedicated room for senior undergraduate and graduate courses.

- Intra-departmental communication and interaction is limited because the physical geographers are in AWESB and the human geographers are in University Hall.
- Students are concerned that many courses listed in the Calendar are not offered regularly and that there are some gaps in course offerings.
- Two courses specified for the Urban and Regional Studies major are taught by sessional instructors, which could be problematic if sessional funding is cut in the budget.
- The Department needs to improve the promotion of co-operative education to students.
- It is a challenge to attract high-quality applicants from other institutions to Geography graduate programs.
- Student satisfaction levels are similar to overall levels in the Faculty of Arts and Science but are lower than several other departments in the Faculty.
- New equipment requests are sometimes a challenge to get approved.

The Self Study Report asked for External Reviewer feedback on four main areas:

- How can the downward trend in enrolment be reversed? Should more popular courses replace specialized courses with small class sizes? How can team teaching be increased?
- Is there a balance between systematic and regional geography and techniques courses? What curricular changes could reverse declining enrolments?
- Should there be required graduate courses, or should graduate course selection be kept flexible? To what extent should we regularize graduate student courses? How can we increase the number of high-quality applications to the graduate program?
- How can we handle the decline in faculty numbers and the impending retirements of other faculty?

External Review

The External Reviewers noted that the Department of Geography is one of the founding members of the U of L and that it continues to make significant contributions to the Faculty of Arts and Science.

Departmental strengths mentioned in the External Review Report included:

- The Department is committed to a range of interdisciplinary programs across the faculties of Arts and Science, Management, and Education.
- The Department fits extremely well with the University's mission of providing a comprehensive, liberal education.
- Teaching, research, and scholarship are strong.
- The Department has become more diverse, multi-disciplinary, and service-based.
- The Department has a very sound program, with noteworthy experiential learning opportunities.

The report also discussed some weaknesses and challenges of the Department:

- The Department's commitment to interdisciplinary and interfaculty programs could become a weakness if the strategic directions of the university change.
- The Department has not developed a vision and has not completed formal strategic planning.
- There is a lack of consensus with the Department regarding how to address staffing issues.
- Geography faculty members who accept administrative or external responsibilities and receive diminished teaching loads are not replaced, resulting in a loss of teaching capacity. This results in a diminished range of course offerings and contributes significantly to the decline in undergraduate enrolments in the Department.
- Courses and faculty complement in the areas of human, cultural, and regional studies have declined significantly.
- There is a lack of coordination and programming in the area of environmental studies and no home department for Environmental Science.
- The physical separation, and resulting cultural divide, of the human geographers and physical geographers is problematic.
- Graduate students are concerned about the availability and content of required graduate courses.

There were seven recommendations contained in the report:

1. The Department of Geography should develop a strategic plan that addresses: teaching and research trends across the Faculty and the University; staffing levels and trends; strengths and challenges; and possibilities for enhanced enrolment and faculty complement.
2. The Chair of Geography and the Dean of Arts and Science must not approve additional or continuing teaching releases unless appropriate compensation for the loss in teaching capacity is negotiated. The Faculty of Arts and Science should also review current policies on unfunded course releases.
3. The U of L should create a School of Geography and the Environment, which will coordinate Geography, Environmental Science, Environmental Studies, and related programs.
4. The Department of Geography should adopt the St. John's Declaration, which aims to demonstrate the relevance to public education of geography and remote sensing, and create a working group to develop and promote a convincing case for more geographic education in the Alberta K-12 school system.
5. The entire Department of Geography should be located in the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building.
6. The Department of Geography should enhance the range of field-based and experiential learning opportunities.
7. The Department of Geography should participate in the development of an overall Indigenous education plan and should consult with local First Nations on ways to engage them in teaching, research, and public policy initiatives.

Program Response

In their response the Self Study Committee addressed the recommendations from the External Review Report:

1. The Department of Geography should develop a strategic plan that addresses: teaching and research trends across the Faculty and the University; staffing levels and trends; strengths and challenges; and possibilities for enhanced enrolment and faculty complement.	Agreed. In 2017 the Department will form a Departmental Strategic Planning Committee to guide the development of a strategic plan for Geography. As part of this there will be a departmental retreat.
2. The Chair of Geography and the Dean of Arts and Science must not approve additional or continuing teaching releases unless appropriate compensation for the loss in teaching capacity is negotiated. The Faculty of Arts and Science should also review current policies on unfunded course releases.	The Chair of the Department does not have the authority to assign teaching duties. The Department supports the need for a faculty-wide policy related to teaching releases.
3. The U of L should create a School of Geography and the Environment, which will coordinate Geography, Environmental Science, Environmental Studies, and related programs.	This recommendation will be considered as part of the Departmental strategic plan.
4. The Department of Geography should adopt the St. John's Declaration, which aims to demonstrate the relevance to public education of geography and remote sensing, and create a working group to develop and promote a convincing case for more geographic education in the Alberta K-12 school system.	Agreed. The Department will initiate steps to adopt the St. John's Declaration and will form a Departmental Outreach Committee.
5. The entire Department of Geography should be located in the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building.	The Department agrees that it should be brought together at a suitable location, not necessarily the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building.
6. The Department of Geography should enhance the range of field-based and experiential learning opportunities.	Agreed.
7. The Department of Geography should participate in the development of an overall Indigenous education plan and should consult with local First Nations on ways to engage them in teaching, research, and public policy initiatives.	This initiative must be led by the VPA in collaboration with the Dean of Arts and Science.

Dean's Response

In his response, the Dean of Arts and Science noted that overall the review found that the Department of Geography is aligned with the U of L mission, and with the values of undergraduate education and comprehensive, graduate-level research. The Department's challenge will be to find the resources to strengthen this alignment.

The Dean's Response commented on the recommendations generated in the review:

1. The Department of Geography should develop a strategic plan that addresses: teaching and research trends across the Faculty and the University; staffing levels and trends; strengths and challenges; and possibilities for enhanced enrolment and faculty complement.	Agreed. A Departmental retreat is planned for May 2017. The Department must develop a clear vision that will help inform any curricular changes.
2. The Chair of Geography and the Dean of Arts and Science must not approve additional or continuing teaching releases unless appropriate compensation for the loss in teaching capacity is negotiated. The Faculty of Arts and Science should also review current policies on unfunded course releases.	This is an issue that is not easily fixed. The cost of replacing all course releases related to appointments and duties would be over \$1M. The Faculty does not have the resources or capacity to backfill those individuals seconded to full-time administrative positions. The Dean will consider a moratorium on further course releases. Negotiating compensation for course releases will be challenging.
3. The U of L should create a School of Geography and the Environment, which will coordinate Geography, Environmental Science, Environmental Studies, and related programs.	The Dean supports in principle the expansion of Geography to include the Environment. However, under U of L regulations "School" implies either a Faculty level unit or the first step towards such a unit. Also, other departments may lay claim to the Environment area. A reorganization in the Faculty involving Environment will be difficult. The Departmental retreat will hopefully provide direction.
4. The Department of Geography should adopt the St. John's Declaration, which aims to demonstrate the relevance to public education of geography and remote sensing, and create a working group to develop and promote a convincing case for more geographic education in the Alberta K-12 school system.	Agreed. The Dean also supports the Department's goal to develop a related action plan and outreach committee. The challenge will be that the Alberta K-12 curriculum does not include Geography.

5. The entire Department of Geography should be located in the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building.	This may not even be possible as the WESB is also occupied by faculty from Biological Sciences. This may be feasible if the second phase of the WESB is completed.
6. The Department of Geography should enhance the range of field-based and experiential learning opportunities.	Agreed. The Department should work with the Dean's office to implement this recommendation.
7. The Department of Geography should participate in the development of an overall Indigenous education plan and should consult with local First Nations on ways to engage them in teaching, research, and public policy initiatives.	Agreed. This will be part of the strategic plan for the Faculty of Arts and Science. There should be greater clarity on what this will mean for departments by Fall 2017.

The Academic Quality Assurance Committee is satisfied that the Department of Geography academic quality assurance review has followed the U of L's academic quality assurance process appropriately, and acknowledges the successful completion of the review.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL SIGNED BY:

Alan Siaroff

Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

Cc: Andrew Hakin, Provost and Vice President (Academic)