



Internal Academic Review 2007-2008
Department of Geography
Internal Academic Review Committee Report to Senate

The Internal Academic Review (IAR) of the Department of Geography is now complete. The Internal Academic Review Committee (IARC) has taken into consideration all of the submissions related to the IAR of the Department of Geography and respectfully submits the following report. The IARC Report to Senate is intended to supplement the findings of the attached Review Team Report and to provide a mechanism for the Head of the Department and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science to jointly report on the progress in addressing the Review Team recommendations.

Summary of the Internal Academic Review of the Department of Geography

The Internal Academic Review Committee (IARC) is unanimous in its endorsement of the reviewers' positive assessments of the Department of Geography and agrees with the reviewers' comments that this unit exemplifies excellence in teaching and research.

The IARC notes that the Department is renowned for its research excellence and applauds the faculty members' efforts to establish national and international reputations and significant research funding. The IARC commends the Department of Geography for taking a leadership role in the creation of innovative programs in environmental studies and global development studies in an effort to contribute to good corporate citizenship and provide stimulating academic programming.

The IARC joins reviewers in their recommendation to continue to enhance the Department's dedication to quality academic programming by developing a new academic plan to focus undergraduate academic program offerings, increase collaboration and opportunity with cognate units on behalf of the graduate students, and continue to support fieldwork opportunities that promote practical skills training.

The IARC agrees with the reviewers that a resolution is required in staffing and workload allocation. The IARC would concur with the reviewers' recommendation to develop a detailed staffing strategy and formalize a workload allocation model that considers both current and long-term undergraduate and graduate needs.

The IARC agrees with the reviewers' assessment that this Department must be recognized for thriving and succeeding in an increasingly resource challenged environment. The IARC concurs with the reviewers' suggestion that the ability for the Department to sustain this level of quality and excellence is under threat. The IARC fully supports the Department's effort, in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts and Science and the SGSR, to explore new ways to address the recommendations outlined in the Review Team Report.

**Outcomes of the Internal Academic Review of the
Department of Geography**

Joint response submitted by the

*Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science and the
Head of the Department of Geography*

The Department of Geography is highly appreciative of the generally positive and constructive comments from the external assessors and the Internal Academic Review Committee (IARC).

In response to the feedback received, and the changing budgetary situation in the Faculty, the Department held a retreat at the Queen's University Biological Station on April 21, 2009. Associate Dean John Pierce provided a useful overview of the academic and financial challenges facing the Faculty and situated the Department within that broader context. This elicited wide-ranging discussion on how the Department of Geography might move ahead while maintaining two key goals: 1) maintenance of the excellence of both undergraduate and graduate programs; and 2) preservation of faculty and staff complements.

Based on those discussions, the undergraduate committee was asked to continue its work on undergraduate course reform including the regrettable rationalization of the GISC program; but the preservation of the core GISC courses as part of the undergraduate geography program and the creation of a certificate in GIS. In addition, the undergraduate committee was asked to examine the current allocation of teaching assistants (TAs) between all four levels of the undergraduate program and whether reducing the number of TAs used in the first year program and re-allocating them to the second, third and fourth year programs would create enhanced learning and teaching opportunities for declared geography majors. Thirdly, the undergraduate committee is examining how more fieldwork can be introduced into the undergraduate Earth System Science and Human Geography programs at the third or fourth year as a capstone experience. Fourthly, the undergraduate committee was asked to investigate, in more detail, courses from cognate departments that might either be shared with Geography or taken as courses in lieu of required courses in the Department of Geography. As a result and on an experimental basis, in the fall term 2009, geography students are taking SOC 210* and the Geography Department is not teaching GPHY 240*. To ensure that geography students are receiving sufficient geographic content, the Department of Geography is supplying one of the TAs in SOC 210*. In addition, the School of Urban and Regional Planning is staffing one undergraduate course every two years on the understanding that Geography will make space in a particular course for some of their graduate students. The Faculty is encouraging such course and resource sharing strategies and will facilitate further discussions with other cognate departments.

As a means of enhancing professional development of both Master's and PhD students, the graduate committee has developed the innovative GPHY 857* Geography Research Seminar, taken by all first year Master's students, and including some seminars shared with first year PhD students in GPHY 801* Conceptual and Methodological Basis of Geography.

The Department also discussed the implications for future staffing given current and projected fiscal challenges, combined with its growth in both undergraduate and graduate student numbers. The Faculty of Arts and Science will work with the Department of Geography to seek ways to address these challenges, with the goal of preserving the program's quality and reputation.

Attachment:

Review Team Report

Report of the Internal Academic Review Team for The Department of Geography

Committee Members:

Dr. Marc Dignam, Department of Physics (Chair)
Mr. Arash Farzam-Kia, doctoral student, Department of Philosophy
Ms. Lynn Freeman, staff, School of Policy Studies
Ms. Jessica Keyes, undergraduate student, Department of English
Dr. John Kirby, Faculty of Education
Dr. Pradeep Kumar, School of Policy Studies
Dr. Katherine Wynne-Edwards, Department of Biology

Executive Summary

This report presents an assessment of the current state and future directions of the Department of Geography at Queen's University. The report considers research and scholarship, the undergraduate program, the graduate program, infrastructure and staff. The assessments, conclusions and recommendations in this report are based on information obtained from the external reviewers' report, the unit self study, meetings with the faculty, students and staff in the department, tours of the facilities and discussions with the external reviewers, Dr. André G. Roy and Dr. Susan J. Smith.

The committee agrees strongly with all of the main observations and recommendations of the external reviewers. In particular, we commend the Geography Department on their research excellence, and their dedication to the undergraduate and graduate programs. However, we agree with the external reviewers that the department is at a critical juncture. The current number of faculty is insufficient if the department is to continue its high level of research and offer comprehensive undergraduate and graduate programs. Changes must be made in the immediate future to the programs offered and the number of faculty in the department to address this issue. The university and the department must work together to ensure that this goal is reached through a combination of program changes, possible repositioning of the Geography Department within the university and especially increases in the number of faculty in the department. Details of these recommendations as they pertain to each of the areas of study (research and scholarship, the undergraduate program, the graduate program, infrastructure and staff) are presented in separate sections, while general conclusions and recommendations are summarized at the end of the document.

Report of the Internal Academic Review Team for The Department of Geography

1 Introduction

The IAR team commends the Department of Geography on their research excellence, their dedication to the undergraduate and graduate programs and the overall atmosphere in the department. This is all clearly evidenced in the self study, the external examiners report and in the meetings with students, faculty and staff. We also applaud the role that the department has played in the development of programs in environmental studies and global development studies. The department has performed admirably at all levels, especially considering the recent erosion in the number of faculty in the department.

Although the department has done very well, given its current resources, we concur with the external reviewers that *the future health and viability of the department is threatened unless the urgent issue of the inadequate number of faculty is addressed immediately*. The department currently relies far too heavily on adjunct and sessional lecturers; even given this dependence, it is still having difficulty providing an adequate course complement at either the undergraduate or graduate level. It is very difficult to see how the department can sustain a robust undergraduate program and continue its high-level research and graduate student supervision without a new business plan for the department that results in an increase in faculty numbers and support staff.

We agree with the external reviewers that this is a critical time for the department: “the faculty is not large enough to maintain both teaching quality and research excellence” [13]*. If the status quo is maintained then there is a “risk of losing staff [faculty], and in the end students” [13]. Addressing this issue in the current environment of fiscal restraint will require a great deal of creativity and flexibility on the part of the department, the Faculty of Arts and Science and the University as a whole.

In the following sections we review each of the following areas individually: research and scholarship, undergraduate program, graduate program, infrastructure and staff. In each area we highlight the strengths and areas of concern and present recommendations. We follow these sections with our overall conclusions and recommendations.

2 Research and Scholarship

2.1 Strengths

- “Department renowned nationally and internationally for its research excellence” [2].
- Nearly all faculty members receive funding from the main peer-reviewed granting councils.
- Recently recruited two new Tier II CRCs.

* All quotations are from the external consultants report. The number in parenthesis after each quote gives the page number on which the quote can be found.

2.2 Areas of Concern

- Time demands on faculty members are compromising their ability to perform world-class research while meeting the needs of an excellent undergraduate and graduate program.
- Not enough technical support for physical geographers. With the high teaching loads and complex equipment that has been recently purchased, it is very difficult for researchers and technical staff to maintain and operate research and undergraduate equipment.
- “Faculty members are frustrated by what they experience as a lack of recognition for the excellence that they achieve in teaching and research”. [10]

2.3 Recommendations

- Reduce the workload to allow the faculty to achieve their research and scholarship potential.
- Develop a new business plan for Geography to provide for growth in the size of the faculty. This could be partially funded by reducing the reliance on sessional teaching.
- Hire a technician to support Physical Geography research and undergraduate labs.
- “A more formalized and transparent workload allocation model for Geography that includes graduate supervision should be implemented”. [11]

3 Undergraduate Program

3.1 Strengths

- “Offers an ambitious and popular teaching program, spanning human and physical geography”. [3]
- Large student numbers, especially in Human Geography.
- High levels of commitment by the faculty (including the adjunct professors and sessional lecturers).
- Has been a cooperative player in the development of new initiatives in undergraduate teaching at Queen’s (e.g. GIS and Environmental Studies).

3.2 Areas of Concern

- “The Department of Geography is finding it hard, if not impossible, to deliver the advertised programme in every area of the curriculum. This is partly due to the small number of faculty members available to teach in a given year”. [4]
- The undergraduate program depends increasingly on the use of sessional lecturers who are often effectively funded by buyouts using grant income. As a result, the proportion of courses (approximately one third) being taught by sessionals is extremely high.
- Student to faculty ratios are very high. This is clearly seen in comparison to most other Geography departments in Canada (see Table I.2 in self study).
- Many upper-year courses are not offered on a regular basis. As a result, fourth year students often take lower-year courses. This reduces the learning progression of the students.
- At current staffing levels, there is no scope to meet, let alone increase what is on offer.
- Cooperation in developing new programs outside of Geography “may not have worked in favor of Geography in the long run as their own expansion has been affected by the allocation of resources to environmental sciences and global development studies”. [11]

3.3 Recommendations

- Develop a new business plan for Geography that will provide for growth in the faculty complement.
- Provide more predictability and stability in fourth year offerings.
- Hire a full-time technician for undergraduate and research laboratories.
- Evaluate course material in different sectors of the university to encourage cross-teaching and collaborative undergraduate courses

4 Graduate Program

4.1 Strengths

- The very high caliber of the faculty members, including scholars of international reputation and two Canada Research Chairs.
- The availability of faculty members to their students.
- The inclusive, supportive research environment.
- The duration of study for the Masters and Ph.D. degrees is good for a discipline where research involves field work.
- The funding policy and the TA program ensure that students have adequate income.

4.2 Areas of Concern

- The intellectual environment could be improved with more challenging courses, and in particular with stronger engagement with world issues.
- The range of courses actually on offer in any one year is too limited.
- There is a mismatch between the advertised syllabus and course delivery.
- At present the faculty members are so stretched that it is very difficult for them take on additional graduate students.

4.3 Recommendations

- Hire more core faculty to allow a greater range of courses and growth in the graduate student numbers.

5 Infrastructure

5.1 Strengths

- Department housed in a spacious building and is well provided with laboratories, computing facilities and offices.
- The design of the new laboratory spaces has been well thought through, with expensive instruments being shared between faculty members.
- The laboratory spaces for undergraduate teaching in Physical Geography have been recently renovated.

5.2 Areas of Concern

- The building is showing signs of age.

- “The use of space within the building seems to reinforce the divisions between Physical and Human Geography, a point that was underlined by students, staff and faculty members.” [8]

5.3 Recommendations

- “Some offices need a facelift, and this would improve the working environment.” [8]
- Examine ways of better integrating the students in different subdisciplines. The plan for a graduate lounge is a good step in this direction.

6 Staff

6.1 Strengths

- Staff is energetic, enthusiastic, committed and efficient and works well as a team.
- Staff helps provide a warm atmosphere in the department as a whole.

6.2 Areas of Concern

- Burden on the staff is increasing.
- Staff members are under stress and barely able to cope with the work at peak times, as new responsibilities--some emanating from the down-loading or off-loading of work from the Faculty Office or central administration--are delegated to them.
- There is no reward structure for exceptional service, especially by long-serving staff.
- There is not enough technical support for the research and training of Physical Geography graduate students.

6.3 Recommendations

- Address lack of reward structure for staff members that are at the top of their pay scale.
- Hire an additional technician to support Physical Geography.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department of Geography is doing an excellent job of keeping up strong research, graduate and undergraduate programs under difficult circumstances. However, this effort has resulted in high work loads for faculty and staff, very high student/faculty ratios, insufficient course availability at both the graduate and undergraduate levels and an over-reliance on adjuncts. *The department is at a critical juncture and maintaining the status quo is not an option.* It is clear that the main issue that needs to be addressed is the insufficient number of faculty members for the programs that are currently being offered. Addressing this will require dedication and ingenuity at the departmental, faculty and university levels. In each section of this document we have presented detailed recommendations as they pertain to the particular aspect of the department being examined (research, undergraduate program, graduate program, etc.). Out of all of these recommendations there are a number that stand out as essential for the future health and reputation of the department. The following is a summary of these key recommendations for both the department and the university.

7.1 Recommendations for the Department

- Develop a detailed staffing strategy. It appears that the most pressing need is to add more faculty members to support the Human Geography program; however the department must develop consensus around a plan for the hiring of new faculty.
- Focus the undergraduate academic plan in order to be able to provide a better offering of courses in the latter years of the undergraduate program. This will increase the degree of progression between third and fourth year courses.
- Increase the exposure of the undergraduate students to practical skills including fieldwork
- Examine how or if the projected increase in graduate students can be accommodated.
- Look to providing more challenging graduate courses with stronger engagement with world issues.
- Examine ways to provide stronger support for the GIS program. This may include increasing staffing levels, greater buy-in from the other parts of the Geography curriculum and alliances with cognate disciplines (e.g. computer science and engineering).

7.2 Recommendations for the University

- Give urgent attention to the resource base for Geography with the goal of increasing the faculty complement. This should include considering imaginative strategies such as introducing rolling contracts, or underwriting temporary posts to address the fact that a large proportion of faculty in any given year are seconded to administrative positions or have been bought out on research contracts. *It is critical that the number of faculty in the department be increased as soon as possible.*
- Consider formalizing and rewarding the role of the Geography Department in emerging research and teaching initiatives on campus.
- Hire an additional full-time technician to support the undergraduate and research labs for the earth systems science group.
- Provide concrete incentives for increases in graduate student numbers. In the current environment, faculty members are overwhelmed by the task at hand.