



6 December 2024

Dean Response to Geography 2023-2024 Program Review

I have read the “Geography, Environment and Sustainability (GES) Department Program Academic Review”, the “Department Review Recommendations and Responses” and the “Department Program Review Department Response”. I would like to thank the review team, Dr. Carrie Frantz (Associate Professor of Earth and Environmental Science, WSU), Dr. Daniel Horns (Dean of the College of Science and Professor of Earth Science, UVU), and members of the GES Department led by Dr. Eric Ewert, for the time and effort in providing a thorough review of the program.

Program Recommendations: I appreciate the thought and time that went into determining the recommendations as outlined by the external review committee and note the faculty/chair response to their analysis. My comments are as follows:

1. **Department Mission Statement:** Under the guidance of Dr. Ewert, the department has developed a comprehensive mission statement consistent with the mission and values statements of the College Social and Behavioral Sciences and Weber State University. This was recognized as a strength by the evaluation team.
2. **Curriculum:**
 - a. The review team noted the high number of tracks offered and the challenge of redundancy of courses. The department overhauled the GES program a few years ago and enough time has transpired to now effectively do the following:
 - i. Assess what is working
 - ii. Review course sequencing
 - iii. Determine if tracks should be combined
 - iv. Determine if there could be better course alignment
 - b. The rate of ~50% of students who finish their degree within two years of completing 90 credits is an area of improvement that needs to be part of the department’s strategic plan. This not only helps save students time and money, but will get them launched into their career earlier, which has many economic benefits for the individual. I recommend working with the college’s Student Success Team (SST) chaired by Dr. Sarah Herrmann and Associate Dean Brent Horn to conduct a deep dive into the department offerings and curriculum to determine how to improve your students’ completion rates.
 - c. Development of an advisory board was suggested by the review team, which I

highly support. The department response to the recommendation was that it is difficult to get unpaid board members to commit time and effort. That individuals are busy and have conflicting schedules. The department felt that direct relationships that have been cultivated is a better approach. An advisory board is a “popular strategy” because, if done right, can help the department become better. The GES department has not had an advisory board to determine if it can be of value. The key is to select advisory board members that are in industry who are invested in the success of the GES program - these potential individuals could be former graduates working in industry or government positions. Other members could include legislators and policy makers. Having an advisory board can also be an effective way to share all the great work the GES department is doing - these individuals can then go on to be advocates for your program. I highly recommend the department assembling an advisory board and making this goal a part of the GES strategic plan. Industry wants to be involved and be heard. They have specific skills they are looking for and we need to know what they are.

3. **Student learning Outcomes:** The GES department needs improvement of their course assessment to ensure achievement of learning outcomes. This was an area of weakness for the GES department due in part to the loss of ChiTester. It is my recommendation along with that of the review team that the department develop effective assessment methods. I highly recommend having the department meet with members of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) to help guide you - WSU online works closely with OIE and can assist with assessment - don't try to take this on by yourselves. Utilize the campus resources that are available. They want to help.
4. **Academic advising:** Advising is “effective and adequate” as described by the review team. CSBS has a strong team of college advisors who understand the department. A great strength is the individualized care and concern faculty have for each of their students and the students recognize and appreciate the mentoring and guidance provided by the faculty. I note that the GES department is to be commended for ensuring the website is easy to navigate and full of clear, information-rich content that students can use for guidance.
5. **Faculty:** GES department faculty are highly engaged. They are accessible, accommodating, and dedicated, with active scholarly and/or service pursuits. The faculty are also to be commended for building strong ties with external communities to facilitate internships, career opportunities, and research projects. I fully agree with the review team that the faculty are “exceptional” and have “excellent collegiality”. The department has been intentional about ensuring the adjunct faculty are well-supported. An additional faculty member was discussed to help with building the Geospatial BS and MS degree programs. In light of the budget cuts the university is facing and the hiring freeze that is in place for tenure track faculty, it may be a couple of years before we can entertain the idea of an additional faculty member.

6. Program Support:

- a. The external review team saw the physical facilities, lab space, new building, and financial situation of the department as strengths. With the addition of a wet lab and analytical equipment in the near future, the department will be able to conduct higher level research leading to enhanced student success with the added benefit of better recruitment and retention of geography students.
- b. The Administrative Assistant position (presently held by Ms. Sarah Rivkind) is part-time and the department requests a conversion of the position to 100% and 11-months. Presently, there is not enough reserve in salary dollars to provide for that increase due to the impending budget cut. Once we have the budget reduction behind us, and more clarity with the college's financial situation, we can explore that request.
- c. The reduction of general education requirements is a big challenge since these types of classes make up >80% of the student credit hours for the department. The majority of the GES majors are recruited from these GenEd courses so other strategies will need to be utilized to entice students into the program. Concurrent Enrollment is a potential recruiting ground for majors. If full-time GES faculty could visit CE classes or have CE classes visit campus, this may help with recruiting. I recommend talking with Dr. Leah Murray and discussing the upcoming field trips she will be offering her CE students that hopefully will help with recruitment. I agree with the external review team that coordination across colleges needs to occur, so that GenEd enrollment is spread across departments and colleges in a somewhat equitable manner.

7. Relationships with External Communities:

- a. Of particular note are the on-campus relationships and collaborations the department has fostered over the years. The department does community engagement extremely well.
- b. Graduates from the GES department have enhanced the off-campus community by working in planning organizations, sustainability programs, and instructing in classrooms. The department is proactive about placing students in internships, which are invaluable high impact educational experiences.
- c. Leveraging faculty expertise for grant programs, legislative presentations, and public-facing scholarship could benefit both the department and the university; activities that the Dean's office supports.
- d. I again recommend (along with the review team) creating an advisory board (addressed in section 2.c).
- e. The review team recommended hosting a career seminar series. The department response was that previous attempts had low turnout. I suggest you talk to the History Department that runs a very successful "career days" every year. You may even consider collaborating with EES for an activity such as this. You could also talk

with Anthropology/Sociology and see if your department can join with them on their “career day” event.

- f. The review team recommended comprehensive tracking of graduates - following up 1 year and 5 years after graduation. If the department assembled an annual or semi-annual newsletter that could be shared with alumni (and present students) it might help keep past graduates linked to the department. The response by the department was that surveying graduates to get contact information was difficult, emails change and there is little interest. My recommendation is to at least try. Most people keep their email addresses and cell numbers - this information can be collected through an exit survey, as suggested by the external reviewers. Tracking this information is something that an administrative assistant could be tasked with.

In summary, the GES Department boasts several strengths and excels in undergraduate education. The faculty are outstanding and committed to student success. They are leading out in sustainability practices, and high impact educational experiences. I encourage the department to incorporate the above recommendations into their strategic plan and discuss progress at department meetings and retreats. I have no doubt the department could expand its potential and further elevate its impact both within and beyond the WSU community if these recommendations are implemented.

Best regards,



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