

Department of Geography, Environment & Sustainability

Program Review Response

November 4, 2024

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Summary

The Geography department is grateful for the thorough and thoughtful review by Drs. Daniel Horns and Carie Frantz as they studied our many materials and spent an entire day visiting our campus facilities and with our many stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, administrators, adjuncts, and community members). We're very proud of the *Strengths* they enumerated.

Standard H. Program Summary

- Outstanding faculty dedicated to student success.
- Collegial culture among faculty.
- Breath of curriculum serves many interests and career tracks.
- Focus on sustainability has established WSU GES as a leader in sustainability education.
- High impact educational experiences.
- Collaborations with Earth and Environmental Sciences, Ogden City, and other community partners.

And we appreciate the *Areas for Improvement, Needs, Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas*:

- Review course curricula to decrease redundancy among some courses.
- Merge some of the tracks within the B.S. in Geography.
- Create an advisory board.
- Improve assessment via better assessment of lower-division and capstone courses and adopting a wider variety of assessment tools.
- Mitigate decreased enrollment due to changes in general education via development of new G.E. courses, recruitment of students into GES majors, recruitment of students from across campus into GIS courses, and more.

Program Evaluation

The full Program Evaluation is available on the Geography Program Review Website. This document will just reference it with highlighted *Strengths, Areas for Improvement, Needs, Suggestions, Opportunities, and Ideas*, and then include our full [Geography Departmental Response](#).

Standard A. Mission Statement

Strengths

- The department mission statement, with five specific objectives (that are linked to curricular learning outcomes), is clearly articulated on the department website: <https://www.weber.edu/geography/mission.html>. The mission statement & objectives cover some of the breadth of geography as a discipline, with the department's key foci (sustainability and environment, geospatial, planning, human and global geography) highlighted. The mission statement and objectives are consistent with the [mission and values statement of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences](#), as well as that of the [university](#).

Areas for Improvement, Needs, Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas: None.

Geography Department Response: We agree.

Standard B. Curriculum

Strengths

- Breadth of Curriculum, Program Tracks, Curriculum Foci, and Student Satisfaction

Areas for Improvement

- Redundancy of courses, High number of tracks within the B.S. in Geography, High flexibility within tracks, Course sequencing and availability, and Geography and Teaching track (is misleading).

Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas

- Create an advisory board, Reduce the number of tracks within Geography B.S., Address redundancy in courses, Address lack of 2000-level courses, Facilitate degree completion, Address the likely drop in enrollments due to reduced general education requirements, Promote GIS across campus, and Develop new courses.

Geography Department Response: There are a lot of suggestions in this section from the reviewers, and generally, we agree. Since we completely overhauled our department curriculum a few years ago, we now have had enough time to better assess what has worked well, and what could use some further tweaking. This curriculum assessment will undoubtedly become important as we deal with the looming Gen. Ed. changes that will eliminate both a physical and social science requirement, and deprive us of the many chances we have to recruit new majors as they take our general education courses.

We agree that the “teaching track” is misleading since we have a Geography Teaching BS, and that the “general geography track” could be folded in with the “global track.” The combination of the “climate and systems track” is less obvious, but worth considering.

We disagree with the worry about high flexibility and course availability charges since all majors take the same 18-credit hour core, and the fact that we work to make sure required classes are available or that substitutions are offered each semester.

The redundancy worry seems overstated, but as we look to create 2000-level courses, we hope to introduce some more prerequisites to our upper division courses so that topics and skills won't have to be taught again. While we urge students to take GEOG 2790 early in their coursework, they don't always take advantage of it being offered every autumn. We hope to offer it spring and fall if demand increases.

In terms of completion after earning 90+ hours, our majors actually do quite well. We believe a better target is to help students graduate in fewer total years, saving them time and money. And while creation of an Advisory Board is a popular strategy these days, department members have found them to be of minor use as they interact with them in other areas (NUGeoTec, NUGIS, and SPARC for example). It's often difficult to get unpaid board members to commit time to meetings, content to curriculum, and to advise. They're busy and often have conflicting schedules with one another. Better, we've found, is direct relationships with members of city, state, and federal agencies, local businesses, and community leaders. These connections are often more fruitful for internships, student projects, and later employment.

As we deal with the loss of Gen. Ed., we'll very much take the advice of creating new classes, developing an all-online track, building more certificates (sustainability for example), and promoting especially GIS courses across the University. We expect to work on these initiatives over the next two years, and in time for the full deployment of the 27-30 credit hour Gen. Ed. reduction mandate.

Standard C. Student Learning Outcomes & Assessments

Strengths

- Exit survey and Existing data indicate successful programs.

Areas for Improvement

- Assessment of lower-division courses, Assessment of capstone courses, Graduating student survey, and Assessment of certificate program.

Needs

- Support from Weber Online and Increased sense of community among students.

Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas

- Improve assessment of lower-division courses, Improve assessment of capstone courses, Utilize student portfolios in assessment, Encourage course-level assessment, Revisit the curriculum grid, Increase variety of assessment tools, and Increase activities to cultivate a sense of community among students.

Geography Department Response: There is no doubt that we need to do a better job at assessment. We have not successfully migrated our Chi-Tester-based assessment of Gen. Ed. classes to Canvas Quizzes. And as the reviewers rightly pointed out, we'll require support from Weber Online to do that. Even then, it is difficult to assess Gen. Ed. across our curriculum when offered F2F, Online, and Hybrid, and at satellite campuses and by both full-time and adjunct instructors. This too, will hinge somewhat on what happens with the Gen. Ed. credit hour changes.

While we administer an Exit Survey to our graduate, it rarely turns up the sort of detailed recommendations that we could use to strengthen our programs. Likewise, we have really worked at cultivating a "sense of community" among our majors (with things like pizza picnics, guest speakers, a geography club, presentations by former graduates, visits from employers and grad. schools, service opportunities, movies, etc.), but they are never well attended. The old saying that "Weber students don't do optional" seems to be so true among our commuter campus of working parents. This in turn frays our relationship with our alumni. Once graduated, we struggle to stay in contact with them to see how their Weber experience helped them in grad. school, employment, volunteer work or whatever they are pursuing.

The review team included many worthy methods for upper division course-level assessment. We like the idea of creating, implementing, and then assessing assignments and/or project that encourage students to demonstrate an adequate level of mastery that we deem appropriate for graduation. For years, the department has worked on a list of KSAs (knowledge, skills, and aptitudes such as spreadsheets or GIS) that we'd like woven through our courses such that students will be exposed to them and reach a level of general competence. All of this is easier said than done, though, and it will take an extraordinary effort to implement and then assess its success throughout our classes and tracks. The reviewers are right to point out the gaps in our assessment and the tools we could use to accomplish it. We have looked at this many times, and struggle with a plan to systematically implement it. At our last department meeting on October 29, 2024, we discussed an end-of-the semester retreat to focus just on assessment.

Standard D. Academic Advising

Strengths

- Student satisfaction, and Multifaceted advising resources.

Areas for Improvement and Needs

- Maintain current level of college advising support.

Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas

- Streamlining tracks and Course sequencing.

Geography Department Response: As discussed above, we agree with the suggestions of combining Tracks and working with prerequisites and online offerings so that students can

sequence courses seamlessly and graduate in a timely manner. We believe we do a good job (with great help from the college advisors) of guiding students to and through the major. On our to-do list this year, is editing our Grad. Maps.

Standard E. Faculty

Strengths

- Exceptional faculty, Comments from students indicate high satisfaction with faculty, Faculty expertise, Faculty influence across campus, Strong adjunct instructors, Department culture, and Support for students.

Areas for Improvement

- It's hard to improve on the exceptional.

Needs

- Support for more geospatial courses.

Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas: None

Geography Department Response: We agree. Our “exceptional” department faculty are among the best on campus. And as the reviewers point out, to do more (like expand our popular Geospatial offerings) we need another faculty line. We are fairly far along in the planning stages (with the EES department in the CoS) of building an all-online Geospatial BS and MS degree. That proposal can only move forward with the guarantee of another faculty member.

Standard F. Program Support

Strengths

- Generally good financial situation, Physical facilities, New Building, and GIS lab.

Areas for Improvement: None

Needs

- Full-time administrative specialist, Wet lab, instruments, and instrument lab space, Support and advocacy from upper administration, Assessment support, and Definition and articulation of development needs.

Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas

- Address instrument needs via sharing with other departments.

Geography Department Response: We are in complete agreement with the Reviewers in this section. We need a full-time administrative specialist. This is a full-time position in just about

every other department, and with the increasing demands of the job, it simply can't be fully accomplished in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. With a generous promise of funding support from the College of Social and Behavior Sciences, we have begun planning for a well-equipped wet lab with appropriate instruments and space. We appreciate the pragmatic idea of sharing equipment with other departments, which can only lead to more collaboration and opportunities for our students.

The potential harm to the department caused by a reduction of two Gen. Ed. classes cannot be overstated. We will lose both a physical science and a social science class to the Gen. Ed. course reduction. Gen. Ed. classes make up more than 80% of our SCHs in the department, and importantly, serve as the recruiting ground for majors. We must work (with administrative support) to both limit the class size and the number of sections for Gen. Ed. classes campus wide. Otherwise, those most popular classes will attract the vast majority of students.

Development is always a tricky enterprise. Geography would welcome funding to support things like labs., field gear, and instruments, but would also welcome financial support for travel, field work, and community partnerships. We are already a leading HIEE department, but it takes financial resources to get students out in the real world and interacting with real people.

Standard G. Relationships with External Communities

Strengths

- On-campus relationships and Off-campus relationships.

Areas for Improvement and Needs: None

Suggestions, Opportunities, & Ideas

- Create a GES Advisory Board, Hold a career seminar series, and Survey graduates.

Geography Department Response: Much of this was addressed in the sections above, and thus will not rise high on our to-do list. The department has found personal relationships with agencies, businesses, and the community to be far superior to advisory boards. We have often held presentations with graduates, employers, and grad. schools for students (with free food), and attendance has always been slim...so much so that it's embarrassing to ask a presenter to take the time and effort for so few people. Surveying graduates has proved very difficult since they move, change email preferences, and don't contact us. We do hope to coordinate more with the Alumni Office to keep track of our graduates, and Career Services has done some work with LinkedIn to track graduates.