

**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**  
**Senate Committee on University Priorities**  
**Memorandum**

**TO:** Senate

**FROM:** John Waterhouse  
Chair, SCUP  
Vice President, Academic

**RE:** Dept of Geography

**DATE:** November 1, 2006

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I have reviewed the External Review Report on the Dept of Geography, together with a response from the Department and the Faculty Dean, and input from the Associate Vice-President, Academic.

The report of the External Review Committee for the Dept of Geography was submitted on May 12, 2006 following the review team's site visit, which took place March 29 – 31, 2006. The response of the Department was received on July 10 and the response from the Dean on September 19, 2006. There was general agreement on the recommendations in the External Review from the Faculty.

With the concurrence of SCUP, I propose that the Dept of Geography and Dean Pierce be advised to pursue the following as priority items:

**Undergraduate Program:**

- To review the adequacy of resources including the faculty complement.
- To ensure that the goals of the undergraduate program are well defined in the Department's plans and communicated to all concerned.

**Graduate Program:**

- To work towards managing the perception among students that a lack of cohesion exists among faculty and encourage faculty to participate to a greater degree in the intellectual life of students.
- To request the Graduate Studies Committee to review all aspects of the graduate program and address each of the issues raised in the review particularly with regard to the expressed need for courses on qualitative and quantitative methodologies and for dedicated graduate courses.

**Workload Equity:**

- To remain vigilant regarding inequities in workload across the faculty and ensure equitable instruction standards are maintained.

**Governance:**

- The Faculty to review the practice of allowing up to two teaching buyouts a year.

**Strategy:**

- Work to overcome issues regarding budget stability, program enrolment, interdisciplinarity and overlap with areas of the Faculty of Science.
- To participate fully in the process initiated by the Vice President Academic for reviewing the effectiveness of the Faculty structure at SFU.

**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**  
**Office of the Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences**  
**MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Bill Krane  
Associate VP, Academic

**From:** John T. Pierce  
Dean, FASS

**Subject:** Response to Geography  
External Review

**Date:** September 19, 2006

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This is, in general, a very positive assessment of the quality of the research and teaching programs within the Department of Geography at SFU. In as much as there is significant agreement between the Department and reviewers over the need for change and necessary improvements, there are at the same time significant differences in opinion concerning the gravity or seriousness of the problems and secondly in how to address these problems. In particular, the Department does not concur with: 1) the view that there is an "impending crisis" 2) the notion that there is a lack of planning and strategic direction (although these can be improved) and 3) the recommendation to appoint an external facilitator to develop a strategic plan. I wish to return to these issues and the underlying differences later, but first I wish to provide brief responses to a number of other issues raised in both the external review document and the Department's response.

**Structure of Undergraduate Programs**

The reviewers expressed concern over the heavy reliance upon sessionals; and, not surprisingly, the Department sees this dependence as further evidence for additional faculty positions. This is not a problem unique to Geography. It is endemic to this Faculty. Our ability to ameliorate the situation is seriously hampered by shortfalls in our own base budget. That said, the situation in Geography is not as severe as in other units. The request for six additional positions equals the sum total of all the net new positions created this year for the Faculty as a whole. That said, we are prepared to work towards expanding the faculty complement.

I am concerned about the observation that there is a lack of clarity in the overall aims of the undergraduate program and particularly the human geography

program; but I am confident in the Department's response that this will be attended to in the normal planning process. Similarly I am concerned by the decline in majors in the physical geography program; but note that the new senior lecturer appointed in this area will have a mandate to recruit students.

### **Structure of Graduate Program**

A number of issues and concerns were raised here. Most importantly the Department needs to address graduate course needs as it does the perception of at least some students that there is "a lack of cohesion and involvement of faculty in the intellectual life of the department". It is true that the space constraints and facilities for graduate students have been ongoing problems that we have tried to relieve with further allocation of rooms in RC Brown Hall.

### **Workload Equity**

With the success of faculty in SSHRC, CIHR and Michael Smith competitions, buyouts are becoming more common and problematic for the department to maintain equitable instructional standards. I too share the concern about creating a "two class academy" and will work in our strategic planning toward solutions. A related equity issue is the curricular conflicts between Geography and Earth Science programming since these are very time consuming exercises which to date have not been resolved satisfactorily. The University has in place review mechanisms to reduce overlap and I am particularly concerned that these are not being followed or implemented effectively.

### **Departmental Governance**

There was a perception among the reviewers that the Department lacked a clear strategic vision and set of priorities. The Department has responded that goals, vision and priorities have been set out in a variety of recent informational and planning documents. At the same time the Department places more emphasis on strategic or guiding principles than strategic plans which, in a highly changeable and dynamic environment, can serve to constrain and not to direct. I think this is eminently sensible. A second issue under governance is the tensions being created by the FASS practice that allows for up to two teaching buyouts per year and the Department's desire, in order to protect the undergraduate program, to restrict this to one buyout. As previously stated, the Faculty's three year plan needs to address this issue more thoroughly.

### **Other Matters**

The interdisciplinary nature of Geography has generated considerable discussion if not debate over the proper faculty location of the discipline and its cohesion as

a discipline. The reviewers make it very clear that in terms of the latter the department should remain united--a view the current department endorses. In this connection the Department observes that, "Geography's diversity is both its great virtue and its greatest vulnerability." They go on to say that, "We must continue to remind ourselves and the University administration that generalization and integration in Geography is a specialization and one that deserves to be seen as more than the sum of the parts." I agree. While the reviewers do not recommend a shift in faculty affiliation to Science, the Department does not necessarily embrace the status quo. Accordingly they have asked the Faculty Restructuring Committee to consider another model or affiliation--a Faculty of Environment. I have no principled objections to this; but it will require considerable study.

### **Recommended Strategy and Conclusions**

The Department sees the need for clearer goals and better integration of teaching programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. More could be done, for example, in better integrating GIS and remote sensing into the human and physical sides of the program. All of that said and the clear recognition of the need for improvements in other areas, there is no sympathy for the view that there is an "impending crisis", nor is there support for an in-depth visioning process conducted by a "professional facilitator". I would not support such an initiative in view of the relative health of the programs and the demonstrated lack of support for such an initiative. I will, however, be prepared to work with the Department to reduce the constraints identified on page 10 that reduce the effectiveness of departmental planning.

JTP/rt

Cc: E.J. Hickin, Chair, Dept. of Geography

**Department of Geography**  
**Response to the External Review Document**  
**10 July 2006**

**GENERAL**

While the reviewers appear to have reached a general understanding of the Department they have not offered meaningful advice on specific issues nor have they done more than obliquely address the three questions they were asked to consider. For these reasons the Department does not find this review document to be very helpful.

The reviewers praise the Department for its significant strengths and achievements (pp 3-4), list a series of concerns (all of which are addressed in our Self-Study Report), conclude confidently that "the quality of the academic program in Geography at Simon Fraser University is very high" (p13), and yet go on to prescribe a major externally orchestrated management exercise because they "*sense the possibility* of an impending crisis (p.11)"!

It appears to have been their "pleasure ..... to evaluate a vibrant, collegial department (of) clearly committed teachers and scholars, (a staff) dedicated to maintaining a friendly, congenial and professional environment (with students who) are enthusiastic and thoughtful about their educational environment". Furthermore, they "anticipate that the geography department will play an important role in the future of Simon Fraser University" (pp 2-3). Obviously we are in agreement with the positive tone of the general assessment but the implication in the external review document that all this has come about without ongoing care for planning and strategizing is rather baffling, particularly since many of the guiding principles governing the Department's evolution and future development are explicitly addressed in the documentation provided to them.

Obviously we agree that there is a need for planning but we see this as an ongoing process and one that this Department has managed rather well to date. We are, however, not enthusiastic about the notion that some external agent be brought in to help us develop a strategic plan. Nevertheless, we would be willing to accept "professional" help in the ongoing process of planning if these resources are available; they were not available for our last departmental retreat when requested.

This Response will return to the matter of strategic planning at the conclusion of the document. What follows are comments on the particular concerns raised by the reviewers in the section "Departmental Concerns" and "Other Matters" (pp 4-9).

**PARTICULAR ISSUES**

Structure of undergraduate programs

- P.4: *Heavy dependence on Sessionals*. We agree that this is a problem but it is largely external to the Department; we simply need more faculty.
- P.4: *Not offering courses frequently enough to meet demand*. We agree that this is a problem for us. Currently we are engaged in a review of certain components of the undergraduate program (for example, the Environmental Specialty in

Human Geography) in order to reduce or eliminate these “bottlenecks” in student flow. Additional faculty is also an essential part of the solution here.

- P.4: *A lack of clarity in the overall aims of the undergraduate programs.* This comment likely reflects some faculty concerns about the apparent lack of structure in the Human Geography program in particular. We agree with the reviewers’ implication that we need to be explicit about the goals of the undergraduate program and reassess that they are being met by the current curriculum. This issue, together with concerns over the level of integration we are achieving and the place of GIScience in the general curriculum, will be revisited over the next year as part of the normal planning process.
- P.4: *Declining BSc enrolments & lack of GIScience majors.* These issues are discussed in our Self Study Report. The BSc Program currently is receiving careful analysis and a new Senior Lecturer hire (starting September 2006), whose responsibilities include promotion and outreach, is part of a general strategy to increase enrolment in the Physical Geography BSc Program. We will continue to monitor the GIS major and encourage promotion but this particular program is the administrative responsibility of the School of Computing Science. We realize that the strategy of expansion with respect to Physical Geography is not consistent with the University plan to cap enrollment in courses administered in FASS.
- P.5: *Among faculty, the role of methodological courses and fieldwork, especially with regard to the human geography streams, seemed to be unclear.* We do not see this as a critical issue but the role of methodological courses in human geography will be revisited during the next year. Faculty are free to incorporate fieldwork into their courses if they judge that to be appropriate and most do so. The role of field courses, camps and trips is the subject of ongoing discussion in the Department. Since the last review, we have added GEOG 310, the Physical Geography Field Camp, GEOG 391, a course in qualitative methods, and GEOG 497, International Field Study. These are not essential to the completion of the undergraduate degree, but there is no doubt that they enhance the program.
- P5: *Student frustrations with timetabling conflicts.* We are aware of this ongoing problem and all our course scheduling is done with this in mind. Problems remain but many are external to the department (Registrar scheduling constraints and room availability are major problems).
- P5: *Hidden prerequisite requirements and difficulty of accessing information by transfer students.* We do not believe that either of these issues is a general problem and in any case are also the responsibility of College student advisors.

#### Structure of the graduate programs

- P.5: *The basis upon which graduate teaching assignments and their course load equivalents were allocated was unclear to the review committee.* We have very clear protocols for these decisions based on student demand and curriculum requirements. The “understanding” of a standard teaching load noted by the reviewers is correct with the qualification that only the teaching of mandatory core graduate courses count as regular teaching load for faculty.

- P.5-6: *Graduate student concerns*. The observations about graduate student concerns noted by the reviewers from interviews are quite anecdotal and not as useful as the formal survey conducted by the students themselves (which was part of the documentation provided). This survey has been reviewed by the Graduate Studies Committee and has already resulted in action for addressing certain problems.

Graduate student concerns include a *perceived lack of cohesion and involvement by faculty in the intellectual life of the Department*. We recognize that we need to work on correcting this impression. An important source of this discontent is the Department speakers series. It is not well attended by faculty or by graduate students beyond those directly involved in the class of new graduate students required to attend this activity. The lack of faculty attendance is not so much a measure of not being engaged in the intellectual life of the Department as it is a reflection of the need to find time in schedules with punishing workloads. We are aware of the problem and will deal with this specific issue in the Fall series of Department Meetings.

Other recurring problems, such as *unevenness in the quality of supervision and variation in financial support of students by faculty*, have always been issues for students (and for those in every other department we presume) but there is no solution to this particular inequality. All our faculty provide at least adequate supervision but some are exceptionally talented and committed. It is equally true that some students are better equipped than others to take initiatives such as obtaining independent funding for their research and that also creates an uneven playing field. These essentially personnel issues will remain with us for as long as we have a research-centred apprenticeship model for our graduate degrees and one that respects individual differences in ability.

The concern noted about *graduate students not being clear about dealing with grievances* is not understood. There is a well advertised and completely transparent protocol for resolving graduate student grievances but perhaps we need to more actively remind students of their rights in this regard. Thankfully, we have very few grievances.

We agree completely with the concerns relayed from students by the reviewers about *lack of space and facilities for graduate students* and we continue to seek relief from the Dean.

The issues of *specific graduate course needs and of doctoral-program courses* will be reviewed by the Department during the next year. The latter have not been favoured by faculty in the past in this Department but that may change as the newly appointed faculty make their preferences known.

There is a concern that the *University orientation session for graduate students does not compensate for the lack of such an event (for the first time this last year) in the Department*. We agree and the Department version will resume in 2006/07.

The Graduate Studies Committee will review all aspects of the graduate studies program during the coming academic year and each of the issues raised by the Department Review will be addressed.

## Workload Equity

- P.6: *Consequences of teaching buyouts as an equity issue.* This cause of inequity among the faculty is a major problem with no internal solution. The University needs to address these issues for the whole institution because it is creating a two-class academy.
- P.6: *Variable teaching loads across Faculties.* There are differences in the teaching loads across Faculties and these remain a source of irritation in Geography because FASS has undergraduate-teaching loads that are among the highest in the University.
- P.6: *Variable start-up conditions for new faculty over time.* There is no retroactivity provision nor is one planned to compensate established faculty who received less than the level of start-up benefits and initial reductions in teaching and service currently enjoyed by new appointees. These differences are to some extent market-driven. It is not clear from the reviewers' report if they are advocating compensation. Faculty certainly are able to bring these issues to the attention of the TPC and to the Chair if they feel they are relevant to their future promotion and evaluation considerations.
- P6: *Conflicts with Faculty of Science programming.* Resolution of curricular conflicts with the Department of Earth Sciences certainly takes time so it is a workload issue for the faculty in the Physical Geography program, for the Chair and the UGSC Chair, and any other faculty members whose course content overlaps with EASC interests, including natural hazards, resources and mineral deposits. Some of these workload problems would be reduced by the appointment of an Associate Chair in Geography responsible for our several programs in the Faculty of Science. This notion is revisited in the *Concluding Remarks* in this document.

## Departmental Governance

- P.6-7: *Interpersonal interactions among Department members are collegial.* We agree that most faculty have very positive feelings in this regard. We also agree that "this spirit of collegiality and integration should be protected and nurtured." (P.3)
- P.7: *Prolonged contentious debates in the Department Meeting over choices regarding new hires.* The reviewers infer that such debates imply a lack of a strategic vision and set of priorities within the Department. We disagree with the sweeping conclusion; even with a strong consensus position there are debates about alternatives and these are seen by most faculty here to be a sign of a healthy department where the consensus can be challenged by those who are not part of it. Hiring priorities here have emerged more clearly over the last several months as discussions about the shaping of the human geography program have continued. Additional resolution will flow from the normal review of the undergraduate program over the coming year.
- P.7: *Lack of an agreed to strategic vision and set of priorities.* Interestingly, the Department faculty views vary widely about this observation. Some agree that we lack a clear explicitly stated vision while a larger number see such a vision implicit in what we do. Certainly goals of the Department are explicit in the

Department Constitution, the Self-Study Report, and in our Three-Year Plans and in a variety of advisory publications. This documentation was provided to the reviewers. There is a consensus among faculty that it is more important to have guiding principles to inform Department actions rather than a formal, less flexible, and potentially constraining, strategic plan.

- P.7: *Faculty reservations about ability to speak openly and be heard.* We do not believe that this is a characteristic of this Department nor a general problem for faculty. No doubt there will always be *some* faculty who will express this reservation among a group of 25+ academics. Nevertheless, the Chair remains sensitive to the need to continue to hear all voices on all issues and will continue to encourage full participation of all faculty in issues of governance.
- P.7: *Conflicting messages from the Administration.* We agree. The most recent example is “use fewer sessional instructors in the undergraduate program and seek SFU-reputation enhancing research grants involving teaching buyouts”. The Dean supports faculty obtaining up to two course buyouts per year while the present Geography Chair actively discourages the practice beyond one per year in order to protect the undergraduate program. It is hardly surprising that faculty feel caught between contradictory policies.

#### The broader institutional environment

- P.7: *Acknowledgement of FASS Dean support.* We agree with the reviewers' impression that the FASS Dean has been more supportive of Geography in the last several years than has been the case for many years prior.
- P.7: *Financial Reporting Problems.* We agree with the Reviewers' impression that faculty have very little confidence in SFU financial reporting and management and fear for Department operating budget sustainability.
- P.7: *Faculty complement in relation to FTE student numbers.* We agree that the FTE student to faculty ratio is high (this is what the reviewers meant rather than what they wrote!) compared to geography departments across Canada and we further agree with their sense that faculty resources are insufficient for the existing program. As explained in our Self-Study Report, the Department needs at least six new faculty positions to bring us near to the Canadian norm. These have been requested - again.
- P.7: *Some faculty thought that there was a need for a full-time undergraduate advisor.* It is fair to say that nearly *everyone* in Geography sees the need for a full-time undergraduate advisor.
- P.7-8: *Peoplesoft problems, poor graduate-student space and infrastructure issues, lack of a Departmental meeting room, unsatisfactory Facilities Management responsiveness.* We agree that the issues noted here by the reviewers are general concerns but ones beyond the Department's control. In particular, space for undergraduate and graduate students and space for a Department meeting room are requests that continue to be rejected as low-priority items by the Administration although we continue to make them every year.

## Other Matters

### Institutional Location

- P.8: *Comments on institutional location.* We note that the reviewers advise against the notion of moving Geography administratively into the Faculty of Science to solve resourcing issues. We note also that they do not address any other relevant issues such as pedagogy, research opportunities, or creating interdisciplinary efficiencies and improving communications. We agree with their strong plea not to split Geography along subdisciplinary lines in order to accommodate some new distributed administrative configuration.

Alternative Faculty homes for Geography other than Science were not discussed by the reviewers but the Department remains open to considering the relative merits of being part of a new administrative unit such as a Faculty of Environment. Issues of institutional location will be considered further during the next year as part of a strategy of accommodating potential models that might be recommended by the SFU Faculty Restructuring Committee.

### Resources

- P.8-9: *Comments on Resources.* We are not sure what the reviewers mean in the first paragraph of this section.
- P.9: *Comments on the limited depth and breadth in physical geography compared to the cadre of human geography faculty and students.* It is the case that there are fewer physical geographers than human geographers and fewer students in physical geography than in human geography. At the time of the external reviewers' visit, however, the physical geography faculty complement was at reduced strength (five faculty then as opposed to eight in Fall 2006 and nine in Fall 2007) because of a recent retirement, resignation, and a death among faculty. Nevertheless, there has always been an asymmetry in the human/physical balance that relates to the original design of the department in the 1960s. The growth plan for new faculty positions will come some way towards reducing this present asymmetry. The reviewers were made aware of the current transient state of the physical geography program but it is not apparent in their comments here.

A plan is in place to recruit a greater number of students to the undergraduate program in physical geography through direct engagement with local high schools and colleges commencing Spring, 2007. The physical geography graduate student numbers will increase as the faculty complement returns to strength in 2006/07. It is also important to note that the physical geography and GIScience faculty are stretched thin by the need to service the undergraduate program in human geography. The need for growth positions in these areas is particularly acute.

- P.9: *Concern about the limited engagement of GIScience-faculty academic and scholarly contributions into those of the Department as a whole.* We agree that we need to seek greater integration of all three components (human, physical and GIScience) in the teaching programs in the Department and this issue will be discussed during the next year or so during the normal planning process. We agree with the principle that geography should be as integrated as possible but it

is unfortunate that the reviewers did not make any specific recommendations in this context. Our established agenda is to consider, among other options, making at least one foundation GIScience course a requirement for all geography majors.

On the research front, this comment on limited engagement makes no sense. GIScience faculty are directly involved in several projects that centre on and cut across physical and human geography and graduate students in the physical and human geography areas make significant use of GIScience research tools.

### Physical Geography

- P.9: *The need for physical geography to be part of a coherent Department of Geography. We agree.*
- P.9: *Not reasonable for all aspects of physical geography to be represented at a research level. We disagree. It has always been the case at SFU and remains an expectation that each physical geographer will maintain an externally funded research program. Admittedly, this is an expression of a BC-rooted university culture that perhaps distinguishes our universities from those in Ontario where decisions have been made to specialize in just a few areas that complement those at the many neighbouring institutions.*

### **Recommendation: Taking Strategic Planning Seriously**

#### Departmental integrity

- P.9: *Comments on the need to maintain departmental integrity. We agree. Interdisciplinary departments such as geography have an inbuilt tendency to disintegrate because of the centrifugal forces always at work within its components. Geography's diversity is both its great virtue and its greatest vulnerability. Departmental integrity must be constantly tended if it is to continue to flourish and this is one of the defining characteristics of our discipline. We do recognize, however, that we are likely to encounter still more stress from these centrifugal forces as the University continues to shift the emphasis at SFU from undergraduate teaching (where disciplinary integrity is easier to emphasize and manage) to graduate program activity and research (where maintaining geography as an integrative holistic enterprise is more of a challenge). We must continue to remind ourselves and the University administration that generalization and integration in Geography is a specialization and one that deserves to be seen as more than the simple sum of its components.*

#### Undergraduate Program

- P.10: *Comments on the need to review the undergraduate program. We agree that ongoing monitoring and review of the undergraduate program is necessary and we will continue to do this.*

#### Graduate Program

- P.10: *Comments on the need to review the graduate program.* We agree that ongoing monitoring and review of the graduate program is necessary and we will continue to do this.
- P.10: *A lack of coherence in the Graduate Program, largely due to a lack of communication.* It is not clear to us what is meant here. The resumption of the Department orientation workshop for incoming graduate students in 2006 hopefully will eliminate most communication problems.
- P.10: *Problem with accessing on-line documents relating to graduate studies.* The Department of Geography web page and the links within it have recently been redesigned and work continues on upgrading accessibility and utility. Many faculty are of the opinion that the real problem here lies in the broader context - the SFU web page – where navigation aids to access department resources could be greatly improved.

### Research

- P.10-11: *There is little indication that faculty members are actively participating in cross-disciplinary research initiatives promoted by the university.* We disagree that cross-disciplinary research is not being done but it is not entirely clear to us what these “cross-disciplinary research initiatives” being promoted by the University might be. We have secured a joint Geography/History CRC and Geography faculty are applicants and co-applicants on four (25%) of the recent CTEF proposals. The reviewers would not have been aware of those recent involvements but a reading of the faculty CV’s indicates a variety of other joint research involving interdepartmental and inter-Faculty and inter-University collaborations within NSERC Strategic grants, “Metropolis” & other SSHRC and CIHR-based projects.
- P.11: *Comments on the virtue of seeking research collaborations and the need to assess opportunities.* Yes, of course, we agree!

### Department Vision

- P.11: *The Department is facing significant challenges ahead.* We can agree but it is not entirely clear what the reviewers mean by this.

P.11: *There exists a tendency to resist change.* We agree with the observation but not with the implication that this is mindless inertia. Geography at SFU, like most other large successful Canadian geography departments, has a traditional core structure that has changed little over time. There is a reason for this: it continues to work well and the conservative approach to planning is to leave it alone (“if it ain’t broke...”). The only significant structural change in large geography departments over the last several decades has been the integration of a strong GIScience presence, a development in which SFU Geography is a leading participant. The reviewers seem to be saying that this overall structural stability is a weakness (the term “old-fashioned” was used by them during the site visit) but they do not articulate in any useful way what modifications to our program would represent unequivocal progress and improvement.

P11: *“(The reviewers) urge the Department to develop vision statements.”* We agree that “it is critical that all components of the Department have a coherent

voice" (P.13) and while we feel that a fundamental underlying vision of our mission is shared by members of the Department, it may be that we are not expressing and reinforcing this as often as we might.

### **Recommended Strategy and Conclusions**

- P.11-14: *Recommended strategy: appoint an external facilitator to develop a strategic plan.* The Department has no enthusiasm for this recommended strategy. On the one hand, we strongly agree that planning with clear goals is essential for any organization to function successfully (indeed, the SFU Department of Geography is an example of such an organization). As faculty, however, we also struggle to find time for the kind of in-depth visioning and review and planning that is being suggested here so having a "professional" facilitator to spend the hundreds of hours necessary to orchestrate this activity at first seems very appealing. On the other hand, the recommendation seems to be a panic response to something we do not recognize as a crisis. This is not a Department presently in crisis and we do not share the sense of *impending* crisis felt by the reviewers. That is not the same as saying, of course, that there are no challenges ahead. There are and some of these are addressed in the *Concluding Remarks* to follow.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

We agree with the general thrust of the external review document recommendation that planning is important. At present there is a sense in the Department that several University issues represent planning constraints over which we have no control. These must be defined before any meaningful long-term planning can continue.

### **Present Institutional Constraints on Department Planning at SFU**

- **Budget Instability**

The financial reporting problems at SFU that have led to Faculties lurching from one apparent financial state to another on a very short time scale has meant that Departments have no stable budget to consider for planning purposes. This problem obviously must be solved before any further planning at the Department level is undertaken.

- **Enrollment Controls**

There is a need to confirm and clarify the University position that enrollments in FASS are capped because all planning to date is based on a growth model. If Geography plans for growth will it be constrained by this policy?

- **Undergraduate teaching buyouts**

Faculty in the Department of Geography are very successful at obtaining external grants for supporting research and funds for teaching buyouts from SSHRC, CIHR

and elsewhere. The CTEF is now a new source. These buyouts have removed from key areas significant teaching resources (~ 6-8 courses/year and climbing) out of the undergraduate program in this Department. It is not possible to predict this impact beyond a year or so.

- **Faculty restructuring**

This SFU initiative has injected considerable uncertainty into the planning process in the Department of Geography. It has been suggested elsewhere that we may well be involved in this restructuring of Faculties in some way and until this exercise is concluded the broad planning process in Geography meanwhile is obviously very difficult. We do agree with the reviewers, however, that the Department should remain as a single academic/administrative entity.

- **Faculties as barriers to communication**

The boundaries between Faculties at SFU seem to be impervious. One of the complications of a truly interdisciplinary department such as Geography is that it must cope with managing programs in several Faculties while being administratively housed in just one (FASS in our case). We are an Environmental Science program and an Environmental Studies program by another name. The environmental initiatives in Science and potentially in any other Faculty often take place independently of developments in Geography because communications across Faculties are weak. This leads to duplication and inefficiencies and turf wars. We have them all.

The present Environmental Science Program in the Faculty of Science is a clumsy but workable arrangement (with Geography and Biological Sciences at its core). A recent external review of that program recommends that it become a department in a new Faculty together with Geography and a third department. This recommendation greatly concerns Geography because that would create TWO environmental science departments and exacerbate enormously the existing problems of overlap and duplication in this area. We believe that concerns about this prospect and other similar problems are at the heart of the external reviewers' "sense of impending crisis" in Geography.

A related and important issue ignored by the Geography Reviewers is the need for Geography to have an Associate Chair to represent Geography in the Faculty of Science. Such an appointment would significantly improve communications and hopefully lead to more rational environmental-science planning across the Faculties.

### **The Reviewers and the Review Process**

Although this Response reflects disappointment with the review document we would like to acknowledge the sincere efforts made by the reviewers to prepare for the site visit and to engage faculty, staff and students in the review process in order to understand us and make recommendations. It simply is not possible, however, for external reviewers to fully understand a department as large and as complex as this one in a three-day site visit. Nevertheless, the report seems to be heavily invested with their impressions gained during their brief time here.

We believe that our reviewers were hampered by several factors. One, explicitly recognized in their report, is that they were not familiar with our Provincial university-

environment (for example, there has never been a need for system-wide Ontario-style rationalization of universities here); the reviewers are all from Ontario universities and have been directly involved in such crisis management. A second factor is that very few (two or three) undergraduate students made themselves available for the review. A third factor is that a large number of our faculty are new appointees who simply have not had the chance to contribute much to the documented record the reviewers were given. That is, there likely was an inevitable disconnect between some of the documented departmental culture and the understanding expressed by the new faculty. Professional acculturation and maturation takes time and in that sense we are a Department in transition. We may also have complicated the task for the reviewers by providing full documentation on our Department retreat. That documentation included a discussion paper (written by the Chair) that was provocative, controversial, and laced with overstatement, all designed to promote discussion. It is not clear that the reviewers understood the function of that document and it might further explain their "sense of impending crisis"!

## SUMMARY

### The Department of Geography

- agrees with the positive tone of the assessment by the external reviewers and believes that it accurately reflects our state of affairs;
- agrees that most (but not all) of the specific concerns raised by the reviewers deserve attention by the Department;
- does not share the "sense of impending crisis" but agrees that there are challenges ahead requiring monitoring and response, as needed;
- agrees that the integrity of the Department must be sustained and protected and that there is a need to seek better integration of the three components of the Department (human geography, physical geography, and GIScience), particularly in the context of the undergraduate program;
- agrees that the present faculty is not sufficient in number to fully service the undergraduate program at SFU (one of the largest in Canada);
- disagrees that the recommended development of a formal strategic plan orchestrated by an external facilitator is appropriate; this is not a department in crisis. In any case, we believe that a formal strategic plan is a less effective and less flexible basis for planning in this highly dynamic university environment than the ongoing planning we do in the context of the general guiding principles that currently inform our decisions.

E. (Ted) J. Hickin, Professor & Chair  
10 July, 2006

Academic Review

**Department of Geography**  
**Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences**  
**Simon Fraser University**

Professor F. Klodawsky  
(Carleton University)

Professor E. LeDrew  
(University of Waterloo)  
Chair

Professor M.-K. Woo  
(McMaster University)

May 12, 2006

## Introduction

The Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University was reviewed by an external team comprised of Professors Klodawsky (Carleton University), LeDrew (University of Waterloo) and Woo (McMaster University) in late-March of 2006. A fourth member of the team, Professor Michael Howlett, Political Science at Simon Fraser, provided invaluable insight about the situation of the Geography Department vis-à-vis the university overall and otherwise contributed significantly to the review process. However, this final report has been prepared without his input, in accordance with the terms of reference for the review. This review is part of the normal evaluation of each academic unit in the university that is held every seven years. The objectives are to provide the University with assurances on the following themes:

- “(a) The quality of the unit's programs is high and there are measures in place to ensure the evaluation and revision of the teaching programs
- (b) The quality of faculty research is high and faculty collaboration and interaction provides a stimulating academic environment
- (c) Department members participate in the administration of the unit and take an active role in the dissemination of knowledge
- (d) The departmental environment is conducive to the attainment of the objectives of the department.” ([http://www.sfu.ca/vpacademic/AVPA/External\\_Reviews.html](http://www.sfu.ca/vpacademic/AVPA/External_Reviews.html))

In addition to these standard items, the review team was also asked to address three matters specific to the Geography Department. They were:

- “1. Given the interdisciplinary nature of geography and the particular foci of the SFU department, is the Department of Geography best situated in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences?
2. Given continued growth in the department (as measured in terms of student FTEs and majors), is the allocation of resources to various activities optimal given the impacts on teaching resources, the graduate program, and the undergraduate curriculum?
3. How might the research, teaching, and general resourcing needs of the physical scientists and the Physical Geog. Program be best accommodated within the department?”

The specific ‘Terms of Reference’, the ‘Site visit itinerary, agenda and participants’ and the ‘List of Documents and Information Sources’ are in Appendices One through Three of this document.

We note that the review team members are all from Ontario Universities. All have participated in various types of program rationalization in response to dramatic cuts in provincial government funding in the mid- to late-1990's. Although these cutbacks had many problematic and negative results, we all agree that one positive outcome was a clarity of focus to guide our own strategic planning processes. Whilst we have not reviewed the Department of Geography at SFU on a comparative basis with any other

department, we do have some appreciation for the many challenges that have faced other Geography Departments across Canada and internationally. We freely admit that our assessment of and recommendations for the Geography Department at Simon Fraser University have been influenced by these matters.

It is a pleasure for a review team to evaluate a vibrant, collegial department. The faculty are clearly committed teachers and scholars, the staff are dedicated to maintaining a friendly, congenial and professional environment, and the students are enthusiastic and thoughtful about their educational environment. We anticipate that the geography department will play an important role in the future of Simon Fraser University.

### **Strengths**

We are most impressed by the congenial atmosphere that prevails at all levels of the Geography Department, including the faculty, the supporting staff, the graduate and the undergraduate student bodies. Goodwill and tolerance are major assets that stand the Department in good stead. Collegiality is accompanied by the strong desire to maintain the Department as a single entity, with its human, physical and SIS components staying together within the same unit. This spirit of collegiality and integration should be protected and nurtured.

There has been a large turn over in the faculty complement and the faculty renewal process is continuing. The result is an enrichment of the faculty at the mid-career rank and at the entry level. Senior members of the faculty are supportive of their new colleagues and there is much potential for harnessing the new energy to advance the Department into exciting directions of academic excellence. The sense of vitality is not lost on the graduate students, who generally express satisfaction with the conduct of research.

Since the last External Review in 2000, progress has been made in several areas. These include a reduction in course load from four to three undergraduate courses per year, allowing the faculty to devote more time to graduate training. The operating and equipment budgets have increased. The \$50,000 incremental award for the operating budge of 2005-06 is particularly notable.

SIS is now well established in the departmental curriculum and research program and it has secured resource support. Human Geography has been enhanced by new hiring. While the replacement of faculty on the Physical side is still in progress, Physical Geography retains its field and experimental traditions. Significantly, most new faculty members have secured research grants from SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR or NSF.

The graduate program has shown signs of improvement. The time to completion of doctoral students has been reduced notably, from about 19 semesters in 2000-01 to 15

semesters in 2004. The works of a number of graduate students are gaining recognition as they reap awards and prizes from national and international meetings.

### **Departmental Concerns**

Together with the important strengths that were evident in the meetings and tours, there also were many discussions about challenges and frustrations. Although no one indicated that these problems were so substantial that they were causing individuals to reconsider their on-going involvement with the department, it was also clear that many of these issues are serious matters in need of timely resolution. The structure of the undergraduate and the graduate programs, workload equity, departmental governance and the broader institutional environment were five areas where concerns were heard from numerous individuals.

#### Structure of undergraduate programs

The high use of sessional lecturers, particularly in first and second year courses, was identified as one current weakness, albeit one that also exists more broadly at SFU. Although undergraduate students were clear that they found the overall quality of teaching to be high, they were concerned about their inability to rely on these lecturers for letters of reference to graduate school. Among faculty, some were not comfortable with the high reliance on sessional lecturers, particularly since many of these lecturers have not had doctoral training.

Moreover, even with substantial sessional support, many courses listed “on the books” are not offered on a regular basis. Another associated problem is that students are often confronted by course conflicts or the inability to take required courses in a semester or at a time when it is offered. This appears to be the case particularly for Human Geography students in the BA Environmental Specialty program.

There was a lack of clarity about the overall aims of the undergraduate programs and therefore, some confusion about the basis upon which to decide whether or not to: specify course requirements, add or delete courses, or revise program options. The four pillars of human geography were put forward as one such organizing framework but the relationship between these pillars and the environmental and SIS specialties was unclear. In particular, some faculty expressed frustration that SIS skills were not being sufficiently promoted among the undergraduate students (as well as graduate students) more generally. Another identified factor was the changing distribution of course enrollments (i.e. declining BSc; lack of GI Science majors). Here, circumstances outside the control of the Geography Department (having to do respectively with the strategies of Earth Sciences and Computer Science) were highlighted as key sources of frustration in preventing the development of programs that were more in keeping with the interests and capabilities of potential students.

Among faculty, the role of methodological courses and field work, especially with regard to the human geography streams, seemed to be unclear. Some undergraduates though, were quite clear about their interest in a more comprehensive package of methodological courses and their appreciation of field work as a learning strategy.

Many undergraduate students voiced frustrations about timetabling conflicts, particularly with regard to lower level course prerequisites that they were not aware of before they arrived at SFU after beginning their studies at a community college. They highlighted concerns about the apparent inability to access accurate information on course and program requirements, via the on-line transfer guide, as well as other relevant sources. In some cases, students were forced to extend their undergraduate studies by as much as one year in order to meet program requirements. The lack of suitable course options is particularly a problem in the spring semester. Students also would like to have a career night offered once a year.

#### Structure of the graduate programs

The basis upon which graduate teaching assignments and their course load equivalents were allocated was unclear to the review committee. It was understood that the standard teaching load was three undergraduate courses, with a 4<sup>th</sup> course equivalent being taken up with matters related to graduate studies, such as graduate supervision and graduate committee participation, among other responsibilities. Further course load reductions were provided when graduate courses were taught.

Many students (n=18) attended a meeting with the external reviewers and also provided an addendum to their self-study report (identified in Appendix 3). They identified concerns having to do with a lack of cohesion and involvement by faculty in the intellectual life of the department, a lack of structure and dedicated course offerings at the graduate level, and inadequate space and support facilities for graduate students. Although students appreciated the 605 course on social theory, they expressed the need for courses on qualitative and quantitative methodologies. More generally, they expressed a need for dedicated graduate courses. When SFU undergraduates become graduate students, there are not many new course options for them, given the practice of piggybacking graduate courses onto fourth year offerings. At the doctoral level, many students expressed an interest in required course work. According to the Dean of Graduate Studies, the lack of a common graduate course for all students is an anomaly at SFU. Despite the lack of a university standard, he reported that a required 3 course load was quite common.

Students also raised concerns about the lack of structure at the graduate level. Although some students feel very well served by their graduate supervisors and committees, in other cases, students were not satisfied with the level of interaction, structure or guidance. Some were unsure about how to address outstanding grievances, particularly as the university encourages such matters to be addressed at the departmental level. There is an interest in greater transparency in this regard. Clarity about the level of

monetary support that might be expected, and differentials in the interest of faculty to seek funds on their students' behalf, were also raised as areas requiring additional attention.

These students also mentioned that the orientation session for graduate students offered by the university did not compensate for the lack of such an event at the departmental level.

Given the interest in the department in continuing to attract a strong cohort of graduate students and the interest of the university in encouraging departments to increase the focus on graduate studies, these concerns certainly need to be addressed in the near future.

### Workload Equity

Most faculty emphasized that the decision to reduce faculty teaching obligations from 4 to 3 undergraduate courses per year was a very positive one. Frustrations remain though, particularly among the mid-career and Physical Geographers, with regard to differential faculty involvement in both undergraduate teaching and service to the department. These frustrations result from a variety of factors:

- the option of teaching buyouts for SSHRC scholars, in contrast to the absence of this option for NSERC recipients;
- the perception that those who have teaching buyouts are also less likely to participate in administrative work at the department level, because they are less likely to be on campus;
- perceived higher teaching loads in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, in contrast to the situation in other faculties such as Science, Applied Sciences, and Health Sciences;
- difficulties in resolving areas of conflict with the Faculty of Science, including efforts by Earth Sciences to introduce new course offerings that duplicate physical geography offerings;
- changes in workload policy for incoming scholars: whereas in the past, new hires were often required to teach many new courses and take on heavy service loads, in more recent years, a reversal in policy has meant that new scholars enjoy reduced teaching and service obligations at first. In contrast, mid-career faculty have experienced consistent high demands both in terms of teaching and service.

### Departmental governance

Although most faculty expressed very positive feelings about interpersonal interactions among faculty and between faculty, staff and students, collegial communication with regard to departmental and university matters, across sectoral and status divides, seemed to be an area of tension, albeit implicit. Although not stated as such, this observation comes from a variety of impressions:

- more than one faculty member mentioned the prolonged, contentious debates that occurred in faculty meetings over choices regarding new hires; such debates indicate that there is a lack of an agreed to strategic vision and set of priorities in the department, where there is some level of 'buy in' about future directions; this impression was reinforced by the fact that despite a recommendation by the previous external review committee that the department prepare a strategic plan, no such plan was available;
- some faculty expressed reservations about their ability to speak their minds and be heard; although there was an appearance of openness, there also seemed to be some unwritten codes about whose opinions matter;
- many faculty expressed frustration about competing messages from the administration, yet did not have a department wide strategy to respond to them. On the one hand, there was pressure to increase undergraduate enrollments but on the other, strengthening graduate and research activities was also being encouraged.

#### The broader institutional environment

Faculty and staff emphasized the positive impact of the Dean of Arts and Social Sciences' generous increase in the department's base budget. They also acknowledged his vital support in establishing and enhancing the department's GIS related capability. Faculty and staff were aware of the Dean's interest in seeing an increase in overall enrollments in Geography and perhaps particularly in Physical Geography. The financial reporting problems are a concern voiced several times, and there is the fear that this base budget increase may not be maintained.

Evidence that the faculty to FTE ratio is high in comparison to geography departments across Canada reinforces a sense that resources are insufficient for the existing program, let alone for expansion. The Dean acknowledges that a structural problem exists with regard to funding arrangements that distinguish students according to their Faculty affiliation rather than their infrastructure and support needs (ie. Labs, field support, technical GIS support). Another area where problems have existed in the past has to do with the level of available advising support, particularly for new students. The combination of a new half-time Undergraduate Advisor, a Physical Geography Lecturer whose duties include advising, and further work to enhance the content of the Geography web site, should have a significant impact on this issue. However, some faculty thought that there was a need for a full-time Undergraduate Advisor.

Faculty and staff recognize that SFU has grown rapidly over the past few years. This fact presents both challenges and opportunities. Although the PEOPLESOFT system has been promoted as a solution to some of the administrative issues that have come to the fore as a reflection of growth, staff described the many roadblocks that it seems to have raised rather than help them to do their jobs. Another area of concern has to do with space. Although undergraduate students were very pleased with their dedicated lounge, other constituencies were less satisfied. Graduate students would like better access to

reasonable office space and infrastructure (telephone, computer networks). Administrative staff expressed their frustration at the time spent in trying to find rooms for meetings and thesis defenses, since the loss of their departmental meeting space. Faculty and staff reported the slow turnaround time until promised facilities are ready for use. They also expressed frustration with the poor level of responsiveness and reliability of Facilities Management, and the feeling that these experiences more generally reflect Senior Administration's attitudes towards line departments.

## **Other Matters**

### Institutional Location

There have been overtures by the Physical Geographers to the Dean of Science to determine whether that Faculty might be a better home for those faculty and students, or perhaps all of the Department of Geography. Although either model would be accommodated by the Dean of Science, we do not recommend this. It appears that a primary reason for such a move is resources in terms of finances and space. It is doubtful that the financing would be equivalent to a normal science department, but would be at some point between an Arts formula and a Science formula. We should also recognize that this would be a restructuring of existing university funding, and not new funding to the university. Given the support by the Dean of Arts and Social Sciences in the form of an increase in the Department's base budget this year, and ongoing investment in Spatial Information Sciences, the advantage may be only in perception. We note that, in comparison to other Geography Departments that we have reviewed through granting council visits, university reviews, etc., the Department enjoys good laboratory space, field research infrastructure and computer hardware, software and personnel support. With an effective strategic plan, they will be in a strong position to evolve in pace with colleagues across Canada.

We cannot stress too strongly the dangers of splitting the physical, human and SIS geographers into any distributed configuration. The integration of skills, knowledge and pedagogical approaches between these 'sub-disciplines' is critical to the very nature of Geography. We encourage members of the department to recognize that the unit will be best served by exploring new routes for cross-cutting collaborations across sub-disciplinary divides.

### Resources

Within a three-day visit, it is difficult to be aware of all of the constraints of budget exercises, but we were impressed by the impact of the resource allocation within the Department using both institutional funds and grant and contract funds. This is evident in the enthusiastic undergraduate body and the diversity of research pursued by the graduate students.

From a disciplinary perspective, however, we note limited depth and breadth in physical geography compared to the cadre of human geography faculty and students. Even though the SIS is a substantial and growing group, there is concern about the limited engagement of their academic and scholarly contributions into those of the department as a whole. The academic department would be strengthened considerably, and to the advantage of the students, by addressing these two issues. The solution is not necessarily only financial.

### Physical Geography

We agree with the many faculty who asserted that it is important for Physical Geography to remain part of a coherent Department of Geography, and for physical geography faculty to feel that their voices has been listened to and acted upon in appropriate ways. While it is not reasonable to expect that all aspects of Physical Geography (such as hydrology, climatology, pedology etc.) be represented at a research level that would support a fundable graduate program, it is reasonable to assume that most aspects will be covered to some extent and regularly in the undergraduate curriculum. The Department must have the ability to support physical geography with a fair allocation of resources, and to recognize the benefits of integrating the strengths of physical geography faculty with the teaching and research needs of other faculty.

### **Recommendation: Taking Strategic Planning Seriously**

Rather than providing specific recommendations regarding budgets, curriculum changes and institutional arrangements, the review team felt it would make more sense for the University to support the Department of Geography in undertaking an in-depth strategic planning process. Inspiration for this approach has come from our collective experiences in our own settings. We anticipate that development of a long-term strategic plan, as proposed in the following section, will address the concerns enunciated above and at the same time, take advantage of the Departmental strengths that we have identified. There are challenges ahead, yet ample opportunities as well. We recommend further consultation on the following items.

#### Departmental integrity

Emphasis has been placed on the importance of retaining the Geography Department as a single entity. The congenial atmosphere of the present faculty, staff and students is a great asset. Splitting into Physical and Human Geography components would be contrary to the spirit of integrity but the issues of equality in work load, differential resource demands and allocation, staffing and student enrolment need to be examined in a structured fashion.

#### Undergraduate Program

Fundamental principles underlying the undergraduate program should be reviewed, with regard to staffing and course offerings. For instance, does the Department want to preserve the integrative features of geography in its undergraduate programs? Or, does it want to offer programs that provide breadth (diversity) at the expense of structure? Currently, there are many programs that demand complicated combinations of courses - an Honours program with few students, and a Co-op program that has an unmet potential to attract more students. The rationale for these programs should be examined vis-à-vis departmental and university educational goals, student interest, training for the job market, professional certification and preparation for graduate schools. The three-pillar system of Human, Physical and SIS groups, entrenched since 1998, offers a useful foundation but this advantage should be exploited to provide cross-disciplinary training in the various offered programs (e.g. make the tools available to enhance the substantive courses, including quantitative, qualitative and spatial methods, remote sensing and field techniques).

The offering and staffing of courses needs to undergo a thorough examination, given that currently, problems of inadequate scheduling can jeopardize the completion of certain programs. The continually updated listing of courses and their scheduling should be considered in conjunction with faculty resources. Other items for consideration include: recruitment and retention, and the admission of students at mid-stream from the community college system.

### Graduate Program

We sense a lack of coherence in the Graduate Program, largely due to a lack of communication rather than administrative limitations. We understand that documentation exists regarding the structure of the program (e.g. Comprehensive Examination, Course requirements etc.) and the processes (e.g. acceptance and review, supervision and examination procedures, intellectual property etc.), but these issues warrant re-evaluation and elucidation, given the diversity of practice that now seems to be the case. Graduate funding support (teaching vs research assistantship), space and resource allocation should also be re-visited, particularly since the graduate body is expected to grow.

(While many documents are to be found on the web, it is very difficult to find the web pages for the department, much less advisory documents. The reviewers had to google the department to find their web page, and many students echoed the same frustration.)

### Research

There is a push at the senior administration level to intensify research activities university-wide. We also note that after decades of low funding, the three major granting councils of Canada are now offering more funding opportunities. There are excellent possibilities for the current and new faculty to strengthen and develop their research. We sense that nationally, a long-standing attitude of complacency towards research is on the wane. Yet there is little indication that faculty members are actively participating in cross disciplinary research initiatives promoted by the university, even though there

appear to be obvious opportunities for Geography to claim important ground in these matters. Should the Department wish to be at the forefront of the university research community, both potential research collaborations and the level of participation should be seriously assessed. We further note that the research issue is closely linked to faculty renewal and graduate training.

### Departmental vision

In light of internal developments (e.g. new hiring, resource and space allocation), external forces (e.g. university strategic plan for research, new layering of funding) and desire for changes (e.g. status quo vs Geography moving into Science Faculty), the Department is facing significant challenges ahead. We sense the possibility of an impending crisis. There exists a strong tendency to resist change, and an absence of a strategic plan for the Department in spite of the ample opportunities that are becoming available. The Department is at a crossroads. We urge the Department to develop vision statements, taking advantage of its assets, re-focusing its priorities and thinking one step ahead. This cannot and should not be accomplished expediently, but requires a thorough examination of past and present activities, serious and unprejudiced appraisal of capabilities and capacities, and a critical assessment of opportunities that are opening up at the level of the University and the broader academic community. We encourage the SFU Geography department to take advantage of the opportunity to engage in a sustained process of developing a strategic plan, and by so doing, strengthening the capacity of the Department to engage in geographic teaching and research.

### **Recommended Strategy**

To ensure that the Department is well positioned to take advantage of the many excellent intellectual and operational resources within the department, ongoing external opportunities within the larger context of the University, and opportunities within the academic discipline of Geography itself, we propose a procedure that has proven successful elsewhere.

The objective is to provide an opportunity for the department, consisting of faculty, staff, students and colleagues, on- and off-campus, to chart its own way to the future. The approach involves engaging a facilitator from a non-university environment with demonstrated skills in structural reorganization and inter-personal development. The objective is for the department to define its own vision, strategy, tactics, and implementation milestones that will enable a feasible planning process.

In the case described below (and it should be noted that this description is culled from our personal experience), the academic unit was facing a real crisis that could have resulted in the group merging with another related but not necessarily compatible facility in order for operations to remain viable. Staff were concerned about their employment futures, students were fearful of their academic credibility upon graduation, and faculty were

apprehensive about academic integrity. This was not a case of creating a crisis to precipitate a desired action, as has admittedly happened elsewhere in Ontario.

A facilitator was hired. The selection of the facilitator was based upon that person's twenty-year record of guiding change within organizations that ranged in size and substance from a division of General Motors, to other academic units in Canadian universities and small non-government organizations.

The operation included two- or three-hour sessions with groups of a maximum of ten people. Each group represented interested faculty, staff, and students within the academic units involved, and colleagues from outside the immediate group (such as Co-Op programs), as well as from individuals outside the university (such as potential employers of graduates). The objective was to engage a cross-section of people that would be affected by the unit's strategic plan, and who would be responsible for carrying through some of its final elements.

At each stage, there were enough groups scheduled so that all who wished to participate were able to do so. These consultations were organized around tasks that included identifying strengths and tensions, opportunities, focusing upon a mission, vision, strategy, tactics, and then consideration of potential implementation steps and timelines. After conclusion of the consultation for each task, the results were reviewed by an executive committee, and then by the academic units that as a group were involved in an assessment. The result was a collegial 'buy-in' by most of those affected. This then defined the context for the next consultation task.

After identifying the strategy, the subsequent tasks involved not only ongoing consultations in working groups of ten, but also a series of retreats by executive committee members and other interested persons to review the various options that had been identified. The complete process for a group of approximately 90 individuals took seven months. The result was a 15-page document that the majority of participants viewed as the guiding principles for 5 and 10-year evolution. The plan included a proposal for increased faculty and supporting staff positions in two strategic areas that would raise the reputation of the group to an international caliber.

We suggest that the guiding principles for proceeding with this type of a process in the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University include the acknowledgment that:

- there is the tremendous potential as well as existing excellence of the department in key sectors that justify the investment of time, energy and resources. The purpose of the process is to build upon current strengths.
- strategic planning is a proactive process that is necessary for the future viability of the department and not simply another step towards rationalization of an external agenda.
- this is not an imposed hurdle but a process of enablement within the context of an organizational structure and the evolution of current thinking within the discipline.

- the facilitator must be skilled in organizational and strategic planning with considerable experience in interpersonal relationships.

- the facilitator must a professional in the appropriate field and should not be someone from the field of geography. In Geography, experience has indicated that it is probable that many faculty have conducted research in a similar context and believe that they know of a better procedure, or know of an individual that could lead such a process, thus jeopardizing the independence and hence the credibility of the facilitator and the process. Instead, it is important that:

- the facilitator not have any vested interest in the outcome.

- the process focuses on the future viability of the group and the department must be able to 'buy-in' to the goals, process and any outcome.

### Conclusions

The review team is confident that the quality of the academic program in Geography at Simon Fraser University is very high. This is evident in the care and dedication of the faculty and staff, and an enthusiastic and strong student body at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. A full evaluation of all pertinent academic documents, interviews with the faculty, staff and students, and consideration of the national and international evolution of the discipline of Geography supports this assessment.

There is clear concern on the part of the reviewers that there is an 'impending crisis' in the near future for the Department. This can be averted through careful and thorough planning and development of the resources available to it. We have discussed many concerns that were evident in the review process. This is not a reflection on the personnel, nor the nature of the structural home for Geography within Simon Fraser University. It is a warning that many structural issues within the Department must be addressed and acted upon. Despite recommendations in past reviews, and efforts by the Department, there is not a strategic plan in evidence. As a consequence, there is considerable ambiguity about the future directions of the Department. At this time, when there are many new faculty who want to establish their careers in the Department, and many faculty at all ranks engaged in productive and exciting research of considerable benefit to the wider academic community in Canada and internationally, it is critical that all components of the Department have a coherent voice. The roadmap may evolve with time as opportunities arise, but there has to be direction for the entity as a whole to take advantage of those opportunities.

The solution that we recommend is to engage the services of a completely neutral facilitator with no preconceived notions of what an academic department should be, nor what the discipline should aspire to. These notions must be determined by the department itself as part of the process, so that all can be comfortable with the outcome. We have seen the benefit of this approach in cases where academic groups were in very serious trouble because of structural issues. This is not the product of one-day retreats but an in-depth and sustained involvement by all until a cohesive plan is agreed upon. There will be a financial investment and a time investment to ensure that the current

strengths evolve and are sustained. This will provide the opportunity and means to achieve assurance in the second, third and fourth review themes at the next review cycle:

“(b) The quality of faculty research is high and faculty collaboration and interaction provides a stimulating academic environment

(c) Department members participate in the administration of the unit and take an active role in the dissemination of knowledge

(d) The departmental environment is conducive to the attainment of the objectives of the department.” ([http://www.sfu.ca/vpacademic/AVPA/External\\_Reviews.html](http://www.sfu.ca/vpacademic/AVPA/External_Reviews.html))

**Appendix 1**  
**Terms of Reference**  
**Department of Geography**  
**Simon Fraser University**  
**External Review 2006**

The purpose of the external review process is to provide the University with assurances that:

- a) The quality of the unit's teaching programs is high and there are measures in place to ensure their evaluation and revision.
- b) The quality of faculty research is high and faculty collaboration and interaction provides a stimulating academic environment.
- c) The Department members participate in the governance of the unit and take an active role in the dissemination of knowledge.
- d) The environment is conducive to the attainment of objectives of the Department.

The Review Committee will assess the Department and comment on its strengths and weaknesses, on opportunities for change and/or improvement, and on quality and effectiveness. The Review Committee should make essential, formal, prioritized recommendations that address its major concerns, with reference to the resources available to the Department and the objectives described in its three-year plans.

Issues of particular interest to the University and/or the Department that we would like the review team to consider during the review are:

- 1. Given the interdisciplinary nature of geography and the particular foci of the SFU department, is the Department of Geography best situated in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences?**
- 2. Given continued growth in the department (as measured in terms of student FTEs and majors), is the allocation of resources to various activities optimal given the impacts on teaching resources, the graduate program, and the undergraduate curriculum?**
- 3. How might the research, teaching, and general resourcing needs of the physical scientists and the Physical Geog. Program be best accommodated within the department?**

Other areas of the Department to be considered by the review team include:

**1. Programs**

- structure, breadth, orientation and integration of the undergraduate programs including the cooperative education program.
- structure, breadth, depth and course offering schedule of the graduate programs.

- graduate student progress and completion, and support for graduate students.
- enrolment management issues at the undergraduate and graduate levels including, for the former, majors and service teaching.

## **2. Faculty**

- size and quality of the faculty complement in relation to the Department's responsibilities and workload.
- teaching, research and service contributions of faculty members, including the level of external research support.

## **3. Administration**

- size of the administrative and support staff complement, and the effectiveness of the administration of the Department.
- adequacy of resources and facilities provided to support teaching and research, including library, laboratory, equipment, computing, and office space.

## **4. Connection of the Faculty within and outside the University**

- the Department's concept and plan for teaching and research and relationship with the other units within the University.
- relationship between the Department and the community.
- relationship with alumni.

## **5. Future Directions**

- the plans of the Department are appropriate and manageable.

## Appendix 2

### Site visit itinerary, agenda and participants

Wednesday March 29

- 8:00-9:00 Opening Meeting, PCR, Strand Hall  
(Krane, Pinto, Dench, Pierce, Driver)
- 9:15-10:15 Meeting with Geography Chair, RCB7123 (Hickin)  
Tour of facilities (Jasper, B-Jae)
- 10:15-11:45 Undergraduate Studies Committee, Halpern 123  
(Hayter, Brennand, Schmidt, Winton, Jones, two undergraduates)
- 12:00-12:50 Lunch Meeting of Review Committee, DAC  
(in private)
- 1:00-1:45 Meeting with Dean of Arts and Social Sciences in Dean's Office  
(Pierce)
- 2:00-3:00 Human Geography Group 1, Halpern 123  
(Clapp, Hayter, Roseland)
- 3:00-4:00 Human Geography Group 2, Halpern 123  
(Bromley, Kingsbury, Mann, Sturgeon)
- 4:00-4:30 Chair and Departmental Assistant, Halpern 123  
(Hickin, Jones)
- 4:45 Return to Hotels

Thursday March 30

- 8:30-9:10 Meeting with Chair, Halpern 123  
(Hickin)
- 9:10-10:00 Staff (Jones, Marcia, Kathy, Dianne, John, Jasper, B-Jae)
- 10:00-10:40 Co-op program, Halpern 123  
(DeGrace)
- 10:40-11:50 Graduate Studies Committee, Halpern 123  
(Bromley, Brohman, McCann, Stefani, Christina)
- 12:00-12:45 Lunch Meeting of Review Committee, DAC  
(in private)
- 1:00-1:45 Meeting with Dean of Science, P9310  
(Plischke)
- 2:00-2:50 Physical Geography Group, Halpern 123  
(Hutchinson, Brennand, Lesack, Schmidt)
- 3:00-4:00 Undergraduate Students, RCB5202  
(8 undergraduates)
- 4:00-5:00 Graduate Students, RCB5202  
(18 graduate students)
- 5:00-6:30 Reception, ADC
- 6:30 Return to Hotels

Friday March 31

8:15-9:00 Open Meeting, Halpern 123  
(Lesack, Jerome – graduate student)

9:00-11:00 Meeting with Dean of Graduate Studies, Halpern 123  
(Driver)

11:00-11:50 Meeting with SIS Group, Halpern 123  
(Roberts, Dragicevic, Schuurman)

12:00-1:15 Lunch Meeting of Review Committee, DAC  
(in private)

1:30-2:30 Newly-appointed Faculty, Halpern 123  
(Hedley, Mann, McCann, Kingsbury, Sturgeon)

2:30-3:15 Mid-career Faculty, Halpern 123  
(Clapp, Dragicevic, Lesack, Schmidt, Schuurman)

3:20-3:50 Final Meeting with Chair and Departmental Assistant, Halpern 123  
(Hickin, Jones)

4:00-5:00 Closing Meeting, PCR in Strand Hall  
(Waterhouse, Krane, Pinto, Dench, Pierce, Driver)

5:15 Return to Hotels

## Appendix 3

### List of Documents and Information Sources

#### Pre-meeting Self-study package

- Terms of Reference, Department of Geography, External Review 2006
- Itinerary of Site Visit
- Simon Fraser University, 2005-2006 Calendar
- Facts about the University
- Recreating Canada's most exciting university, the President's Agenda 2005-2009
- Faculty of Arts, Three Year Plan:2004-2007
- Senior Administrative Structure
- B.C. University Student Outcomes: 2003 Survey of 1998 Baccalaureate Graduates
- B.C. University Student Outcomes: 2004 Survey of 2002 Baccalaureate Graduates
- Department of Geography, External Review 2006, Graduate Student Data
- Grant Tracking System, Research Funding, Geography

#### Self Study Report, volume 1

- Introduction
- The Faculty
- The Undergraduate Program
- The Graduate Program
- Departmental Governance and Resources
- Summary and Concluding Remarks
- Appendices
  - 1: Geography at Simon Fraser University (an historical review)
  - 2: Department of Geography Academic Information Report
  - 3: The Department of Geography Retreat, 2005
  - 4: The 1999 Review and the Department Response
  - 5: The Department Constitution
  - 6: Faculty Profiles in Brief
  - 7: Faculty Research Funding, 2002-2005
  - 8: SFU Faculty and Staff Salary Scales
  - 9: Criteria and Standards for Tenure and Promotion
  - 10: Undergraduate Program Check List
  - 11: Instructional Activity Analysis
  - 12: Undergraduate Course Offerings in 2005
  - 13: Undergraduate Course Outlines, 2005
  - 14: Graduate Course Offerings, 2005
  - 15: Current Graduate Students and Graduate Thesis Titles, 2000-2005
  - 16: Graduate Student Funding Sources
  - 17: Graduate Student Subsequent Careers

- 18: The Geography Co-op Program
- 19: Committee Membership
- 20: Library Report
- 21: Environmental Geoscience Programs at SFU
- 22: Department Space and Floor Plans
- 23: Guide to New Faculty

Self Study Report, Volume 2  
Faculty Curriculum Vitae

#### Documents provided during the Review

- Simon Fraser University, Strategic Research Plan 2005-2010
- External Review, Department of Earth Sciences
- Earth Sciences Response to the External Departmental Review Document
- Dean of Science's memorandum re External Review of Earth Sciences
- Department of Geography memorandum to Environmental Science Review Committee (6 March 2006)
- Work Allocation Committee, Discussion Paper: Fall 1998
- Discussion Paper on Reorganizing Undergraduate Teaching of Physical Geography: Fall 1999
- Teaching Loads and Equity: memorandum from Brennand
- Department of Geography Guide for Undergraduate Studies
- Definitions and Notes: course grade scale
- Graduate Studies Fact Book
- Graduate Awards: 2005/2006
- The Survival Guide prepared by the Geography Graduate Association, July 2005
- MA Program
- MSc Program
- Qualifying Examinations, 2002
- Faculty-student Co-authorship: General Principles, 2003
- List of prize-winning presentations by Geography students 2005-2006
- Brief notes from graduate student meeting for Departmental Review
- Graduate and PhD students concerns: memorandum from Etya
- Electronic mail information provided by Department Chair:  
PhD graduands  
Departmental web page for graduate information