

11 July 2017

Dr Ulrike Hardenbicker  
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Dear Ulrike,

Per the Academic Unit Review policy, I am pleased to provide my response to the external reviewers' report following the recent Academic Unit Review (AUR) of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies.

I would like to begin by thanking you and your colleagues in the Department for undertaking the preparation of the self-study, and for hosting the review team. I also want to thank the external reviewers, Dr K Wayne Forsythe of Ryerson University, Dr Dirk de Boer of the University of Saskatchewan, and Dr Theresa Garvin of the University of Alberta, as well as the internal reviewer, Dr Stephen Bend of our Department of Geology, for their time, collegial goodwill, and valuable insights.

This is the first unit review of the Department in 15 years, and as such is a key document. Generally, I find the report stimulating, clear-headed, and helpful. It sets out recommendations that will enable the Department to meet new challenges and better serve a wider range of students while responding to the fiscal realities facing the academy across much of the western world. I will respond to it under the following headings, which correspond to a number of the reviewers' recommendations.

#### **Develop a strategic plan**

This recommendation (discussed on p. 14) is central, and is one I strongly support. The reviewers note "some quite divergent interests that inhibit" change in the Department. They add that a "traditional approach [involving] a broad swath of course offerings is no longer relevant or feasible in today's university environment." A common vision and plan for the Department, set firmly in the context of the University's strategic plan, are much needed.

#### **Reduce the number of undergraduate programs by at least 40%**

It is good to see that students are highly satisfied with the content of GEOG courses, with access to instructors, and with their overall experience in the Department. Yet we need to address, not just in GEOG but across the institution, a number and complexity of programs that are disproportionately large for a campus of our size, that put obstacles in the way of students, and that are unsustainable with the resources available to us.

Indeed, as the GEOG reviewers note, "a multitude of closely-related, relatively similar programs creates confusion for students, complicates student advising, and represents an administrative burden to the department, faculty, and university" (p. 3). The reviewers urge the Department to "focus on its flagship programs" (p. 3), reduce the number of required courses in programs (p. 3), reduce the degree of specialization in upper-year courses (p. 4), and greatly reduce the number of calendared undergraduate courses (p. 5), which they characterize as "far too many for the teaching resources of the department."

Similarly, joint majors with very low enrolments might seem not to require large additional expense to the Department and Faculty, but they incur administrative expenditure via committee and registrarial time, and further increase the complexity (and therefore the costs) of student advising.

### **Laboratory and field-based learning**

The recommendations (pp. 6-7) for reconfiguring the lecture/lab protocols for on-campus courses and for a regularly scheduled field-based courses are compelling. With regard to the latter, UR International, with its institution-wide support of international faculty and student mobility, may be able to provide assistance for international field experiences and general student/faculty mobility that was not available on this campus seven or eight years ago.

### **Timetabling**

Since 2009 the campus student population has increased more than 25%, and looks set to grow more in 2017-18 despite a continuing decline in the local high-school graduating population. Simply put, we are attracting more students from outside our traditional “catchment” area, many of whom require on-campus residence space and food services. Hence the recent expansion in student residence halls, which are financed via the revenues earned in residence and other ancillary operations.

For several years now, however, there has been no capital available for new academic buildings (the most recent of these was RIC). All indications are that there’s little prospect of this changing in the next three to five years. We are therefore obliged to teach and mentor growing numbers of students in a static inventory of classrooms, lecture halls, and labs. Doing so successfully requires centralized timetabling. I would ask the Department to consider inviting the Registrar for a discussion of the Department’s needs, and how they can be sited in the context of institutional needs.

### **Graduate program and research**

There are some intriguing ideas here, especially potential partnerships with Brandon University and Medicine Hat College. I would add the University of Saskatchewan to that list. The graduate programs in public policy offered through the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School are a clear illustration of the success achievable when two strong partners come together to create something greater than the sum of its parts.

Or, to look at the question from another perspective, how would a re-regularized graduate program in Geography and Environmental Studies at Regina find a niche not already partially or wholly occupied by graduate programs in neighbouring institutions in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta? Are there enough graduate programs on the prairies already?

As resources become more and more constrained, we need to ensure that the programs we offer are competitive, distinctive, and sustainable. This is especially true at the graduate level, where per-student instructional costs are high because of low enrolments and the very considerable time faculty devote to supervision and mentorship outside of classroom and laboratory instruction.

Colleagues in Geography might wish to refer to the external reviewers’ report on the Department of Physics at [https://www.uregina.ca/president/assets/docs/PVPA%20docs/Council%20Committee%20on%20Academic%20Mission/academic%20unit%20reviews/UR\\_Review\\_of\\_Physics\\_final.pdf](https://www.uregina.ca/president/assets/docs/PVPA%20docs/Council%20Committee%20on%20Academic%20Mission/academic%20unit%20reviews/UR_Review_of_Physics_final.pdf). In the section of that document devoted to graduate teaching in Physics (pp. 7 ff.), the reviewers note the Department’s strong focus on experimental subatomic physics and, latterly, medical imaging, as a reason that Physics has been able “to provide research opportunities for graduate students of the highest calibre.” Physics research at Regina has flourished in large part because years ago that Department decided to focus on only one or two sub-specialities. In choosing that strategy, it has gained national and international renown for its research, as well as considerable funding.

My hope would be that, were the Department and Faculty to consider re-regularizing the graduate program, it would be on the basis of strong partnerships with neighbouring institutions, and of offering graduate training and mentorship in areas unique to the University of Regina among its sister institutions on the prairies.

### Staffing and administration

One of the most fascinating aspects of university structure (and resource allocation) is how subjects and disciplines are grouped into departments, and departments into colleges and faculties. It's often quite arbitrary. At some Canadian universities, for example, History is in the humanities; in others, the social sciences. Similarly, Psychology can be found in faculties of Arts, Humanities, Science, and still others. At the University of Alberta, Film Studies is in the same department as English. The examples can be multiplied.

The reviewers note that some of the people with whom they spoke raised the question of moving physical geographers to the Faculty of Science. Their reaction to this idea was to say that if the physical geographers go, so too must the human and social geographers: the Department should not be split.

This is, of course, a matter for the Department initially, and the Faculties of Arts and Science subsequently, to discuss. If it makes sense – in terms of service to students, enriched research and community impact, and enhanced collegial relations – it is certainly worth pursuing. If it doesn't, it isn't.

### Conclusion

There are a number of other recommendations in the report that time prevents me from touching on here. As a whole, however, the reviewers' report provides valuable advice about moving the Department ahead at a time in which, as they say, universities "around the world are undergoing fundamental changes" (p. 13).

I hope you find these reactions to the external reviewers' report helpful, and would be happy to discuss them with you and your departmental colleagues at any time that is convenient.

The next steps in the review process, as approved by CCAM, are set out in the Academic Unit Review policy, available online at <https://www.uregina.ca/policy/browse-policy/policy-OPS-130-005.html>. CCAM will be in touch with you regarding these.

Sincerely yours,



Thomas Chase  
Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

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