

Contact: Diana Gonzalez

**REQUEST TO RE-OPEN ADMISSIONS TO THE BACHELOR OF ARTS PROGRAM IN
GEOGRAPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**

Action Requested: Consider recommending approval of the request by the University of Northern Iowa to re-open admissions to the Bachelor of Arts Program in Geography in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Executive Summary: Admissions to the program were suspended in March 2012 (Agenda Item ESAC 2) to allow faculty to restructure the program curriculum. The request to re-open admissions is based on the fact that the restructuring has been successfully completed. This proposal was reviewed by the Board Office and the Council of Provosts and is recommended for approval. The proposed program re-opening addresses the Board of Regents Strategic Plan priorities to “provide educational excellence and impact as well as economic development and vitality” and Goal #8 – “Iowa’s public universities and special schools shall be increasingly efficient and productive.”

Background:

- ◇ **Description of program.** Geography is a high-tech discipline which examines the science of place and space on the earth. Geographers look at human and physical elements on the earth and examine why they are located where they are, how they differ from place to place, and how humans interact with and shape the natural world. There are two main branches of geography – physical geography and human geography. Physical geographers study the natural systems of the earth and how they impact, and are impacted, by humans. Human geographers examine the spatial expressions of people. A third area in geography is Geographic Information Science which comprises a series of tools and techniques, such as geographic information systems, remote sensing, global positioning systems, and cartography. These tools and techniques are used by physical and human geographers to study and understand the complex spatial patterns of the earth. The Bachelor of Arts Program in Geography offers four tracks for students to customize their education – Geography; Environmental Geography; Urban and Regional Analysis; and Geography Teaching.
- ◇ **Effect of restructuring.** The redesigned program combines the four tracks into a single program with a common core of classes followed by a “Professional Concentration” elective block. The Professional Concentrations have been updated but continue to follow the primary career paths students take and include Environmental Systems and Sustainability; Planning and Developing; and Globalization and Regional Geography.
- ◇ **Rationale for the requested action.** Administering multiple distinct programs was cumbersome and inefficient. Collectively, the four programs had sufficient enrollments but, individually, enrollment counts were low. Combining the efforts into one program with a common core increases efficiency, simplifies marketing, modernizes the curriculum, and more accurately reflects the department’s enrollment. The improved structure will help the department to better articulate program options, assist in curriculum development and streamlining, help students identify the most suitable coursework, and increase enrollment and graduation rates.

Following suspension of admissions, the department engaged in an intensive process of redesign that included reviews of the overall curriculum, individual courses, student opinions, peer institutions, and the program mission. The result was the redesigned program that has changed all aspects of the program from the large, overall structure, to the content of individual courses, to the consideration of learning outcomes.

- ◇ Three-year cost analysis of re-opening admissions. The program redesign resulted in collapsing three programs into one, and the complete elimination of a fourth program. Since the program structure is smaller now, no additional costs are anticipated. One faculty line was cut from the department, which along with the reduced size, reduces the cost of the new program compared to the previous configuration. The program was redesigned to ensure that it could be offered with existing resources.
- ◇ Duplication. The redesigned program is unique in the state. The University of Iowa offers the only other Geography program in the state with an enrollment of approximately 70 students across four different programs. The programs offered at SUI do not have focus areas in the same fields as the UNI program. This is particularly true of the Planning and Development, and Globalization and Regional Geography focus areas which are unique and represent a general focus on applied, career-ready geography. Many graduates work in local and state planning offices, agencies involved in regional development, and businesses with multinational goals.
- ◇ Five-year trend of applications prior to suspension of admissions. During the five-year period prior to suspension, enrollments had increased by 63% from 14 to 36. The issue with enrollment size was related to fracturing the major into multiple programs. The fracturing created additional challenges in recruitment which will be improved with the new design. It is likely that the new design will result in higher enrollments through better program articulation. Students declare a Geography major typically during their junior year because (1) there is a significant number of community college transfers; (2) students often change to Geography from a different major; or (3) students might spend one or two semesters “trying out” Geography classes before they officially declare the major. Therefore, trends in applications have been difficult to track. Applications for the individual programs under the old design are not available; however, there was an average of 10 applications to the department for the prior five years for new incoming students.
- ◇ Five-year trend of graduations from the academic program prior to suspension of admissions. The program’s annual average graduate rate is 14 students or about 36% of enrolled majors. The rates have typically ranged from 13 to 15. Graduation rates are a better measure of the program’s success than enrollments because of the imbalance of lower class to upper class students; 85% of the majors are junior or seniors.
- ◇ Marketing plan to recruit students. The Department of Geography developed a **Growth Plan**, which is a comprehensive review of enrollment patterns and past recruitment strategies. It outlines nine specific areas for increased recruitment activities that include methods to better identify and communicate with potential students and, particularly, how to broaden the base of prospective new students not yet enrolled at UNI.

- ◇ Workforce need/demand. Graduates from the program have a broad range of career options in both the public and private sectors. A review of a single Iowa job website revealed 58 open positions for which some aspect of Geography appears within the required skills. The department receives 10-15 direct requests each semester to forward job ads to students. The U.S. Department of Labor indicates a 35% growth rate for Geography jobs which outpaces almost all other social science categories.
- ◇ Link to institutional strategic plan. Goal 4 of UNI's Mission is to "prepare students to thrive in a diverse global environment." Geography is significantly linked to understanding global issues. The Bachelor of Arts Program in Geography is an integral part of the university's goal to provide a strong liberal arts foundation (Goal 1). The Department of Geography is committed to providing world-class courses and programs in modern Geography and providing students with knowledge and skills necessary to engage in global issues and thrive in the evolving job market. As the world becomes increasingly connected, Geography has emerged as one of the most fundamentally important subjects. Furthermore, geography is a required subject for several teaching training programs and is an embedded subject in the Iowa Core Curriculum. Geography provides a significant service to the university and has carried an average annual enrollment of 1,200 students during the past several years.
- ◇ Supporting information. The department believes that Geography is critical to the overall mission of the university. It can be one of the most misunderstood disciplines but remains one of the most fundamentally important in maintaining a well-educated, globally aware, workforce. Historian Walter McDougall states in his essay on the need for Geography at universities "...geography's important ought to be so obvious that no one would challenge it."¹ This is supported by findings from the "National Geographic Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study" which serve as a reminder of the lack of regional and global awareness of young Americans.
- ◇ Date of implementation. The proposed re-opening of admissions to the Bachelor of Arts Program in Geography at the University of Northern Iowa will become effective upon approval by the Board of Regents and will be included in the University's General Catalog. New students will be admitted for the entering class of Fall 2013.

¹ Walter McDougall, "Why Geography Matters...But is So Little Learned," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2003.