

External Program Review: San Francisco State University MA in Geography

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Overview

The geography MA at San Francisco State University (SFSU) is a strong and valuable program that fits the mission of both this campus and the broader CSU system. SFSU has a distinct identity as a campus addressing questions of social justice and practices of community engagement. The Geography MA Program complements this focus with an emphasis on teaching applied skills and serving the needs of the Bay Area Region. Specifically, the Geography MA Program is engaged in both education and research that analyze the ways in which the city is integrated with the surrounding region through bio-physical, spatial and political-economic processes. The department members are involved in work on urban and peri-urban ecology, issues of health, diversity and urban transportation and access to public space. Further, the department provides an important service to GIS users across the system through the CSU Geo-Sciences Consortium which runs the CSU system ARCINFO site-license and the GIS Institute which provides continuing education. The current GIS program and the proposed MSc in GIS are invaluable to the region – as the only program offering this curriculum north of Santa Barbara.

This is a collegial and diverse department with a high-quality faculty. Faculty members are productive and engaged teachers and researchers who are well-respected by colleagues across the discipline. The graduate students recognize the quality of the faculty and describe themselves as being taught by experts in their field. The faculty are working very hard to create a dynamic and popular graduate program and are doing a great deal with scarce resources. We are impressed by the high quality of teaching and graduate advising being accomplished by department members. We were also struck by the research collaboration among department members, spanning the sub-fields of human, physical and GIS within the discipline of geography. The MA program at SFSU complements other graduate programs in geography in the Bay Area through its focus on an applied education that provides work-force training and practical skills for planners, local leaders and businesses. This MA program is also distinctive in the area for its focus on nature-society relationships and on education and research that focuses on environmental challenges and urban health and sustainability.

Distinctive Strengths

This is a strong and high-quality program with no ‘red flags’ waiving. We summarize some distinctive strengths here before moving to recommendations for the future (the heart of reports such as these).

The quality of their academic programs is high. The Geography Masters program is rigorous and students are broadly trained in techniques as well as interlinked physical and human processes as we noted in our overview above. Beyond the geography core program, MA students can specialize adequately in the department’s hallmark areas of urban geography, resource management and resource planning, and physical geography based on the curriculum. Students are clear about their pathways to graduation. Students told us that all of the faculty provide informal mentoring and career advice. The formal advising role that Nancy Wilkinson (graduate program advisor) plays was particularly commended by the students.

The MA program’s strength in GIS is a ‘feather in the cap’ of the SFSU campus. We are particularly impressed with synergies between the GIS academic program, the GIS Institute and the CSU Geo-Sciences Consortium. The department services the entire CSU system’s ARCINFO site license and they also bring in funding for staff and equipment through the GIS Institute in ways that support the broader teaching mission of the department. A range of courses are offered for graduate students, and it is clear that the department has both a strong infrastructural basis for the GIS MSc Program and the capacity in teaching and advising. We are extremely supportive of this MSc program which will fill an enormous hole – as the only graduate GIS program in northern California. It has the potential to serve a wide region and build into a nationally recognized applied GIS program. The faculty are already offering many of the courses for this program, and it is clearly a crucial service to students and the larger region. In these tight budgetary times we do not see this program as a drain on resources. The department is poised to support the program within existing resources. We also anticipate that with its establishment and growth it will indeed bring more students and external resources to the department.

We met with twenty graduate students, and they are extremely positive about their experiences in the program. They expressed satisfaction with the quality of the education they are receiving and also with the sense of community in the department. The high morale among the graduate students is especially impressive for a commuter campus. Opportunities for professional and informal interaction between undergraduate students, graduate students, staff, alumni, and faculty are numerous, through the colloquium series, the summer alumni party, and very importantly, the departmental library and resource room housing the Federal Repository of maps and their equipment depository. These interactions enhance the undergraduate and graduate student experience in the department. We will note below the need for more of the faculty to be actively involved in advising graduate students on program requirements in order to spread the advising burden more equally among colleagues.

We are also impressed by the strong relationships the department maintains with its alumni. The department organizes an annual summer barbecue, maintains an active listserv and current graduate students also organize a popular speaker series which attracts department graduates. Alumni also teach in the GIS certificate program and are active in connecting students with internship opportunities.

Our Recommendations

Departmental Identity

This department is an important contributor to the core mission of SFSU. We encourage the department members to continue to articulate their considerable contributions to the broader institutional vision at SFSU. This department has a great story to tell, and we think it can be showcased more effectively. We encourage the department to discuss its identity and particular contributions – and how these reflect its position within SFSU and the Bay Area more broadly. We recommend this because the department has made several junior hires in recent years and these new colleagues will take on ownership of the department’s identity and direction through such discussions. Further, this process of establishing their identity and core contributions will also be of great value as the department discusses upcoming hires and their strategic specializations in the future.

Faculty and Staff

It is crucial that the department receive an additional faculty line, beyond the current hire of a new chair (at the Full Professor level). We strongly support the hire of an additional biogeographer because of the high demand for nature-society coursework and research and the popularity of the RMEP track within the MA. Of course, with the arrival of the new chair inclusive discussions about the future directions of the program are necessary and how that new colleague will fit into that broader vision going forwards. As we suggest above, it is important for all of the faculty to consider their individual and collective priorities together as they continue to discuss the addition of new colleagues that complement their vision.

Faculty retention has been an issue on campus and in this department. We reviewed the reasons for recent junior faculty departures, and we found no identifiable, specific fault in the department itself. We conclude that the upper administration must be much more proactive in recruiting and retention. This should include a clear policy on spousal hires to keep quality teacher-scholars at the university. Clearly the lack of affordable housing is another severe constraint on faculty retention, and we encourage the upper administration to continue to seek avenues for dealing with this difficult challenge for SFSU because of its location in such an expensive real estate market. If the university is genuinely dedicated to recruiting and retaining high quality faculty, then these obstacles of spousal hires and affordable housing must be faced with due diligence or it will continue to struggle with attracting dynamic faculty and continue losing its best and brightest. Clearly the university does not want to experience an erosion in

quality of its strong departments and programs that would place its status as a premier CSU in jeopardy.

The departmental staff members are superb and provide vital support services to all members of the department. One of the great benefits of the current situation is with the hiring of graduates as staff. Certainly it builds alumni relations and keeps them connected to the department, and it also allows for additional informal advising opportunities, and, thus, provides continuity for students and the program. We strongly recommend continuing to support the existing complement of staff for this department (via work-study allotments and other funding sources).

Support for Faculty Research

We understand that both the CSU and the campus seek to elevate their respective research profiles, evidenced in the WASC focus on a review of graduate programs. We were not, however, fully clear on what the campus is doing to support faculty research. The SFSU seeks to expand its research profile and yet we found that finding time and resources for research is an ongoing challenge on the campus. We certainly recognize the delicate balance between research and teaching on the campus (in keeping with the mission of the CSU). However, we recommend that the College and Department put more emphasis on faculty research grant-getting. The Department should continue to take advantage of the mini-grant funding from the Chancellor's Office and view it as seed money for external grant applications. The department should take more advantage of college and university resources. With the appointment of a new Associate Vice President for Research it appears a variety of programs are under development, e.g., the appointment of grant writers in the colleges. The department will need to be aggressive about seeking out this and other support that currently exists in the Office of Sponsored Programs and the Social Science Research Institute that is close to campus and the support that is under development by the university and college. The submission of external grants is a key element to continual building of the geography and GIS programs. This is important both for supporting graduate students as well as supporting faculty research agendas. We also recommend that the department continue to advocate strongly for funding for graduate student assistantships and fellowships from the University.

Curricular Issues

We support the department's strategic decision to focus the MA program on areas of strength and specialization (urban, health, environmental planning and resource management, GIS, physical geography). The department has been smart, strategic, and successful in hiring colleagues who combine two or more substantive strengths, e.g., GIS and geomorphology. We also strongly support the approval and implementation of the proposed MSc in GIS because the faculty are unanimously enthusiastic about this program and have clearly committed to offering the relevant courses regularly.

Graduate students are concerned about introductory course availability, but this appears not to be the fault of the department. It seems that incoming MA students have low priority for course registration and this must be addressed by the University to prevent longer times to degree. In terms of graduate advising, the department is discussing the continuation of strong advising for the students across all three of the graduate programs. Clearly, Nancy Wilkinson has been a crucial player for all incoming students and Andrew Oliphant plays a strong role for the physical side, but the department must also clarify who will play that role for the GIS program. Further, more of the faculty should become familiar with all aspects of graduate advising to spread that load more effectively.

Space

Urgent: A serious concern was raised in the self study: lack of ventilation in a research lab using soil samples. Currently the room has no fume hood and that creates a serious concern in terms of risk management for the university. The department is investigating the possibility of a portable fume hood solution. This should be the highest priority in terms of space issues for the department, college, and university. The university Risk Manager and Office of Environmental Health and Safety should investigate an appropriate solution and fund the solution. This is a university issue, not a department issue.

We understand that space is at an extraordinary premium at SFSU. We recommend however, that existing departmental space such as teaching lab spaces and the Federal Map Repository are absolutely crucial to the work of the department and must be retained and protected. The Federal Map Repository serves multiple, valuable functions for the department: as map library, as field equipment safe storage, as meeting space for faculty-student interactions, and as seminar space.

The GIS teaching lab is very heavily scheduled -- leaving students little free access to that lab for studying and assignments. An open self instructional lab with the appropriate GIS software is needed. It appears the Social Science computer lab could be utilized for this if it is properly equipped with GIS software.

The department is in serious need of a physical geography teaching lab space. It is standard practice that a dedicated physical geography teaching lab is available in geography departments. Physical geography is a science, not a social science. When it is housed in a College of Social Sciences the different needs of this subdiscipline in geography can go unappreciated. Just as in the College of Natural Sciences, Physical Geography requires teaching lab space for soil studies, large flat maps, climatology lab experiments, etc. An ideal situation is a dry lab and a separate wet lab. This department has neither. Future renovation and construction plans must include this need. Alternatively, since a new building and/or renovation seems to be fare into the future, we recommend that the department and college work together to

secure an arrangement for access to teaching lab space, e.g., in the College of Natural Sciences where a collaborative relationship already exists with geography and geology.

Further, department enrollments are limited to 74 seats, not by demand for their classes, but rather by the lack of access to large classrooms on campus. Since SFSU has a centralized system of assigning large lecture classrooms, the college needs to be proactive in pressing for its departments to gain access to large classrooms. The department certainly has demonstrated the demand and if allowed to expand its large lecture offerings, they would be able to be more creative with faculty workload while still meeting FTE targets. We urge that the university understand this constraint and we urge the department and college to be aggressive about securing such lecture spaces.

Resources

We certainly are aware of the challenges universities face in refreshing computers and old technology. This is a particular challenge for this department because of the high end computers needed for GIS. GIS is not a flash in the pan, temporary trend in geography as well as other disciplines. Therefore, this is both a current problem for the department and a continue one into the future. San Jose State University has taken the lead in requiring students in some majors to purchase their own laptops, thereby shifting the cost of upgrading computers onto the students. The difficulty with this type of solution for GIS is the amount space required for the Software, applications, and data is quite large making it unrealistic to expect students to be able to purchase laptops that would handle the GIS applications. In addition, the types of projects students work on with GIS require much more give and take and discussion amongst students and faculty. It's difficult to envision a student sitting at home, working on these projects. Access and use of labs at the university is really the best scenario. So, while we have considered alternative solutions to the continual upgrading challenges of the GIS labs, we know of no other solution that is currently utilized by geography and GIS programs. Quite simply, they build the labs and refresh the computers.

In addition to computer needs, the department is also in need of a consistent and transparent university or college process to update old equipment. Again, much like the College of Natural Sciences, this department has technical equipment, e.g., microscopes, tree cores, measurement tapes, and GPS units to name a few that need replacing as modern equipment becomes available or as equipment deteriorates.

As previously mentioned, the department would readily utilize graduate teaching assistants, graduate research assistants, and graduate fellowships. The department should continue to look for funding from external sources for funding for graduate research assistantships in the grants that they develop. The department can make strong arguments for graduate teaching assistants who could assist in the GIS courses working in the labs to assist students in developing their maps and projects and in the physical geography lab courses. Much

like you would see in Natural Sciences, student assistants in the physical geography labs help set up experiments, assist with the lab assignments, instruct in the use of equipment, e.g., GPS units, soil testing equipment, stream flow meters.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

It is clear that SFSU operates in a centralized model. Given that organizational structure, we recommend that more efforts are made to create increased transparency in the distribution of resources and process of decision making. This is particularly important for departments to be able to put strategic plans in place and to protect junior faculty. For example, if the process for how you get a mini grant, how you get a new computer, how you get funding for international travel, etc. is clear, then a junior faculty is not put in the imbalanced power position of having to ask for an implied favor. For example, it was difficult for us to understand:

- why the department cannot gain access to large classroom usage,
- the review process for mini-grants for a fair and equitable allocation of awards,
- how equipment funds are spent on campus and how the department can get on a list to refresh their computers and other equipment needs,
- how they renovate existing space as exemplified by the fumes and hood issue we discuss above.

The department is a strong department with an impressive faculty. The solid sense of community they have developed is inclusive of students, alumni, and staff. With some excellent hires in recent years, it is clear this department is on solid footing and will continue to build on its strengths. It is a department where students are engaged in the discipline and the faculty are meeting the mission of the CSU with their integrative research and teaching.