



# Cyclical Program Review of Geography & Environmental Studies

## PROGRAMS:

Honours BA Geography

Honours BSc Geography

Honours BA Environmental Studies

## Final Assessment Report

Submitted by: Dr. Richard Nemesvari, Dean, Faculty of Arts; Dr. Deborah MacLatchy, Vice-President: Academic; Dr. Kate Carter, Associate Vice-President: Teaching & Learning (Acting)

Date: February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016

## **PART ONE: EXECUTIVE RESPONSE**

Please provide a brief response to each of the following.

### **A) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF REVIEW DOCUMENTS**

**(SELF-STUDY, REVIEWERS' REPORT, UNIT RESPONSE)**

#### **Self-Study**

The Geography & Environmental Studies Self-Study was submitted by the Chair of the Department and provided a thorough review of the three undergraduate degrees offered by the Department: the Honours BA Geography, the Honours BSc Geography and the Honours BA in Environmental Studies, and the 10 programs that those degrees comprise. The self-study narrative included the following:

- Approximately 65% of faculty contributed to the development and writing of the self-study in various ways.
- Most of the recommendations that came out of the last review that are within the Department's control have been completed.
- GES directed questions to the review committee regarding the resourcing of the Environmental Studies program and the relationship between fluctuating graduate student enrolments and course assignments.
- Learning outcomes for all three undergraduate degrees were reviewed and improved upon as part of the cyclical review preparation process. GES programs are well-aligned with both the university's guiding principles and the provincial Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations.
- The curriculum in all programs thoughtfully integrates courses that are core to the field of study, courses which focus on methodology and research skills, and courses that explore sub-disciplines of the field. A 300-level field course is a required component of all programs which allows students to propose and design a research project. GES also offers an optional undergraduate thesis course which has recently been re-structured.
- The Department is currently looking at how to align the Physical Geography program with the accreditation requirements of the Association of Professional Geoscientists of Ontario.
- Most GES courses are open to non-majors with non-major enrolment ranging from 75-98%.

- There are several positive correlations between the undergraduate and graduate programs; for example, teaching assistantships, research relationships and some combined seminar courses.
- Since the last cyclical review the Department has envisioned and implemented several strategic initiatives and going forward, has plans to focus on strengthening and sustaining the Environmental Studies program and its options.
- Faculty in GES have been successful in securing research funding from a variety of agencies and councils; in addition, during the time period under review the Department has held several research chair positions.
- The Department provides a well-documented account of the expertise, professional service and scholarly activity of its faculty.
- During the time period under review, enrolment numbers in the BA Geography have dropped slightly while numbers in the Environmental Studies program have increased. BSc numbers have remained relatively consistent.
- In the conclusion to the self-study, the Department reiterates its commitment to fieldwork for students and its concern over the precarious position of the Environmental Studies program.

### **External Reviewers' Report**

The external reviewers for the undergraduate Geography & Environmental Studies programs were Mike Brklacich from Carleton University, William Gough from the University of Toronto and Scott Ramsay from Wilfrid Laurier University. The site visit took place on March 12 and 13, 2015.

The reviewers provided an executive summary of their report along with three broad summary recommendations, both of which have been included below.

#### *Executive Summary*

WLU's GES is a robust and accomplished Department. While three distinct programs (BA Geography, BSc Geography and BA Environmental Studies) comprise its UG programs, the Department functions as an integrated Unit that values and appreciates the importance of each stream. The importance of supporting the more conceptual aspects of UG teaching in each program with experiential learning is one of the unifying traits within GES. Teaching and research collaborations with other Units in the Faculty of Arts, and in Science and, to a lesser extent, the Balsillie School, represents another dimension of GES's integration within WLU and its importance in maintaining the institution's reputation as a comprehensive post-secondary institution with the Ontario university system.

Similar to many hybrid Geography – Environmental Studies programs across Canada, GES’s program enrolments since 2005 have been marked by two trends. The first is a relatively strong growth in the early part of this period followed by a period of relative stability. The 2<sup>nd</sup> important trait is much of this initial growth followed by a period of relative stability is linked closely to the emergence of the Environmental Studies programs. Many of the factors contributing to these trends are beyond the direct control of the GES (e.g. emphasis on environmental studies in high school curricula rather than geography, changing societal views on the value of a BA) and substantial growth followed by stability reflects GES’s capacity to innovate and develop programs that resonate with contemporary high school students and assist with in-program retention. GES being at the forefront of experiential learning and having highly qualified support staff are two key factors that have allowed GES to “punch above its weight” during this period when competition for the brightest and strongest students has been intensifying.

What is particularly remarkable is this period of growth followed by stability occurred with minimal investment in the Environmental Studies area. It is unlikely that the Environmental Studies program can maintain its current vitality if underinvestment continues. In addition, the recent loss of support staff, declining support for technical teaching staff and limited re-investment in equipment and space dedicated to the delivery of all UG programs could collectively weaken GES’s long term capacity to innovate, attract UG students and graduate high quality UG students who can make the transition into the workforce or graduate studies.

### *Recommendations*

#### **1. IMMEDIATE AND LONGER TERM INVESTMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES**

WLU’s IPRM wisely targets Environmental Studies as a program deserving of enhancement and this commitment provides a starting point for the coupled development of a strategic plan for Environmental Studies and an investment plan.

Immediate, short term investment is needed over the next two years to ensure delivery of a high quality program. Despite the overall recent success of this program, Environmental Studies has not been well positioned to fully capitalize on emerging opportunities and longer-term concerns are evident. For example, both students and faculty noted the need to create a better sense of community. This will become increasingly important as other institutions invest in recruitment and retention of UGs. GES will also need to contemplate whether it wishes to continue with a general environmental studies program that appeals to the widest of audiences or whether its future would be better served with specialization in a few strategic areas, such as environmental governance. The key point here is that GES be given the opportunity over the next two years to plan its future and for WLU to then make commitments to add tenure-track and mid-career faculty in support of a re-imagined program.

## **2. EXPANSION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

GES has shown considerable leadership in experiential learning, including its integration into urban geography and the inclusion of senior UG students in physical geography field excursions. The only immediate concern stems from the changes in the terms of employment for the two technical teaching staff. Experiential learning requires planning and long-term commitments, and the conversion of the technical teaching staff from full-time, year round employees to eight-month reduced load contracts may put experiential learning at risk. Restoration of the technical teaching staff and, if necessary, revised job descriptions that place greater emphasis on experiential learning is recommended.

Experiential learning is clearly part of the GES “brand” and it recommended the Department explore the opportunity to move beyond the experiential learning being an important dimension of individual UG programs and become a cross-cutting theme that is part of GES’s long-term strategic plan and GES become more engaged in leading WLU’s efforts in this area. For example, community-engaged research appears to be an emerging institutional theme within WLU. GES’s experiential learning record at the UG level coupled with the Department’s proven record of academic and research collaborations suggest GES should become a key actor in the shaping of WLU’s long-term plans in this area. Expansion of experiential learning will allow for a clearer articulation of career pathways. This will assist with countering broader societal trends regarding the value of the BA and assist longer term recruitment of high school students in GES’s UG programs.

## **3. ACCELERATED PURSUIT OF PROFESSIONAL GEOSCIENTISTS OF ONTARIO (APGO) FOR PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY**

GES’s physical geographers have been instrumental in building the Cold Regions and Water Science research facility and integrating senior UG students into their field research programs. The integration of academic programs, at the UG and Graduate levels, and research projects has become the norm in physical geography and GES is in a position to grow this area within its UG programs. WLU’s IPRM does not identify the BSc in Geography as a growth area. Maintaining (and preferably growing) this stream without an injection of new resources will be a challenge.

Graduates from UG physical geography programs routinely find employment in a variety of environmental fields and it is recommended that WLU support GES’s efforts to obtain APGO compliance. This will assist with UG recruitment, improve in-program student satisfaction and enhance employment prospects in an increasingly competitive environment.

### **Unit Response**

The Unit Response to the Reviewers’ Report was authored by the Department Chair who provided a response to both the three summative recommendations as well as the

recommendations related to each section of the self-study, some of which were not captured in the summary recommendations. Highlights from the unit response include:

- GES agrees with the reviewers on the need to strengthen the expertise within the Environmental Studies program;
- While GES is keen on strengthening ties with the Balsillie school, they acknowledge the challenges to the undergraduate programs in doing so;
- Efforts are currently underway to revise the GES curriculum so students can count course credits toward accreditation with the Association of Professional Geoscientists of Ontario;
- The Department raises a concern about the funding of teaching-related purchases with research money and the reduction of hours of teaching staff who were responsible for the lab components in the first year GES courses;
- GES corrected the reviewers' apparent misunderstanding about the average number of courses taught per faculty member (4, not 5).

The response of GES to the three summary recommendations is as follows:

**Summary Recommendation #1:** Immediate and longer term investment in Environmental Studies.

**Response:** Though we do not wish to belabour the point, we emphatically agree with the reviewers on this point and wish to stress the importance of hiring a full-time tenure track ES professor in GES. We do note that ES was the only Arts Program to make it into the top ranking by the recent IPRM review.

**Summary Recommendation # 2:** Expansion of experiential learning.

**Response:** We agree that the 2015 cost saving measures have degraded the learning experience of our students as they now have reduced contact time with our professional lab instructors. This has negatively affected the range of teaching methods, the time spent in the field, and the opportunities for individual support (both academically and in terms of mentoring students in their transition to university). This is also liable to hinder our recruitment and retention efforts.

Many of our courses, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year, involve some form of fieldwork (or hands-on lab work). In GES, we believe that this form of hands-on experience encourages our students to expand their horizons and think for themselves, and learn to function in small teams—something akin to the experience they will find in their job once they graduate.

We would like to emphasize that the experiential aspect of our teaching is not limited to Physical Geography, as the review seems to suggest. Courses that emphasize experiences

with the outside world are more the rule than the exception in GES. One recent example is the Capstone Urban Studies Project (GG499Q: CUSP) initiated by Bob Sharpe and Jim Hamilton. This past year (2015), the course provided students with opportunities to work with the City of Cambridge on several projects concerning urban issues. We recognize that our students learn best by 'learning how to do it themselves'. Many of our courses are designed to hand over decision making to the student; as they progress from year 1 to year 4 their responsibilities increase accordingly. The shifting of responsibilities to the student increases their competitiveness in a field of employment where practical decision making and project management are expected as a matter of course.

**Recommendation #3:** Accelerated pursuit of Professional Geoscientists of Ontario for Physical Geography (APGO)

**Response:** We will be advertising this in our material and social media sites over the next year. We will discuss, with the relevant departments at Laurier, the best way of broadcasting this to potential students.

## **B) IDENTIFICATION OF PROGRAM STRENGTHS**

The following departmental strengths are evident from both the self-study and the External Reviewers' Report:

1. The three main divisions of GES (Human Geography, Physical Geography, and Environmental Studies) have avoided becoming isolated from each other and maintain a strong interdisciplinary emphasis.
2. Within its interdisciplinary mode GES has focussed on a number of coherent research areas (Cold Regions, Migration, Food Security) which provide a strong foundation for successful scholarship.
3. GES's highly developed commitment to experiential learning directly aligns with Theme 2 of the new Strategic Academic Plan (2015-2020).
4. The curriculum offered in the Physical Geography program in GES is close to compliance with the accreditation requirements of the Association of Professional Geoscientists of Ontario (APGO). The Department's discussion with the University of Waterloo to assist in this effort is a positive and productive development.

## **C) OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT AND ENHANCEMENT**

1. The Department should attempt to create better sense of community among different elements of its programs, and between the students in those programs.

2. The Department needs to consider whether to continue with a broad-based environmental studies program or whether it would be better to focus on a small grouping of strategic areas.

## **D) RECOMMENDATIONS APPROVED FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN PRIORITY ORDER**

A number of the External Reviewers' recommendations (Recommendations #1, #2, #7, #8) entail resource allocations that cannot be addressed outside of the wider context of the budgetary constraints in the Faculty of Arts, and in the university as a whole. They are therefore not included in the prioritization list, since they may not be implemented outside of the budget process.

In regard to Recommendation #9: Provide more support for the research opportunities of faculty members, the Departmental Response rightly notes that its faculty members possess a very strong record of scholarship, and that its course load is not unusual among many other institutions. This recommendation is therefore not prioritized.

In regard to Recommendation #10: Recruit better students, perhaps capitalizing on migration expertise in recruiting international students and first generation [sic] Canadians, it should be noted that recruitment decisions do not take place at the departmental level, and therefore this recommendation is not prioritized. However, the recommendation aligns with new Strategic Academic Plan (2015-2020) in regard to increasing diversity of Laurier's non-traditional student base, and discussions can be integrated into Laurier's developing strategic enrolment management process, for which the Dean of Arts sits on the steering committee.

Of the 12 recommendations listed in the Reviewers' Report, the following should be prioritized:

**Recommendations #5 and #11: Persist with aligning the Physical Geography program with the requirements of APGO.** These two identical recommendations reinforce the usefulness of moving towards this accreditation. Since the Department is already making efforts to create such an alignment it should continue doing so, in partnership with the University of Waterloo if necessary.

**Recommendation #12: Complete the development of the Co-op Water Science Program.** The BSc in Applied Water Science received MTCU funding approval in November 2015, and anticipates enrolling its first cohort of students in September 2016.

**Recommendation #3: The experiential education component of the Environmental Studies programs should be enhanced.** Since experiential learning is one of the main themes of the new Strategic Academic Plan (2015-2020) this recommendation, like

Recommendation #12, is part of the institution's wider goals, and will need to be pursued by all departments and programs in the Faculty of Arts.

**Recommendation #6: Curricular changes are recommended to enable the Environmental Studies students to feel part of a distinctive cohort earlier in their educational experience (during first and second year).** This recommendation should be implemented in order to increase the sense of "place" that students feel in Environmental Studies, but it should also be part of the wider strategy to demonstrate how the different elements of Geography contribute to an overall field of study.

**Recommendation #4: Consider bolstering its relationship with Balsillie School of International Affairs in the areas of migration and environmental studies.** Interactions with the BSIA can be productively enhanced in certain areas, and need to be balanced with an equal priority to maintain excellence in the undergraduate programs offered by GES.

## PART TWO: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Please include any of the recommendations that came out of the review that are to be implemented by the academic unit.

<b>Recommendation to be Implemented</b>	<b>Responsibility for Implementation</b>	<b>Responsibility for Resourcing (if applicable)</b>	<b>Anticipated Completion Date</b>	<b>Additional Notes</b>
Recommendations #5 and #11	Department Chair		August 31, 2017	
Recommendation #12	Department Chair		Program has been approved by MTCU and will commence in September 2016.	
Recommendation #3	Department Chair Dean of Arts	Dean of Arts	August 31, 2017	
Recommendation #6	Department Chair		January 1, 2018	
Recommendation #4	Department Chair	Dean of Arts  Provost and VP: Academic	December 1, 2017	The Department should focus on how best to balance its BSIA partnerships with its undergraduate program priorities.