

Department of Geography  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

**STRATEGIC PLAN**

Revised April 2010, May 2012, and November 2013

*On a per-capita basis, for several measures of productivity, the UT Geography Department is one of the most productive among Ph.D.-granting departments in North America*

—The 2004 Program Review Committee

**1. MISSION & VISION**

The mission of the Department of Geography is to highlight the importance of a geographic perspective in preparing citizens for a globalizing world by cultivating respect for geography and geographers within the State of Tennessee and around the world. To accomplish this mission, our Department strives to increase its national and international standing and maintain its excellence in human geography, physical geography, geospatial analysis, and human-environment studies. The Department is at the forefront of geographic research, addressing key environmental and social issues by applying advanced technology, rigorous laboratory and field methods, and innovative quantitative and qualitative analysis. It values partnerships with public agencies, industry, non-government organizations, research laboratories (e.g., ORNL) and scholars in other University of Tennessee departments and at other universities. We embrace a “student-centered” approach, teaching a well-rounded curriculum that enables students to succeed in life and contribute to social betterment. Faculty members work in the classroom and outside the classroom to cultivate student research skills, career preparation, and professional leadership skills. Our Department promotes student-faculty collaboration in research and encourages students to participate in departmental governance. We approach the campus, the discipline, and the public with an attitude of openness that promotes a culture of diversity and inclusion that extends to students and faculty, and their academic endeavors. Our departmental community includes a valued partnership with alumni whose success testifies to the quality of education received from the Department of Geography and the University of Tennessee.

**2. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

1. Become one of the top-ten geography PhD-granting programs in the nation.
2. Expand the faculty to 22 full-time, tenured/tenure-track appointments.
3. Make graduate-student stipends competitive with those of our peer and our aspiration-level programs.
4. Increase the number of geography majors and broaden their learning and skill-development inside and outside of the classroom.
5. Add staff-support to assist faculty with grant and curriculum development, laboratory supervision, and management of computer/technology assets, and undergraduate advising.
6. Enhance faculty and student diversity.

7. Solidify alumni relations and increase alumni gift-giving (to fund key department needs such as laboratories, student research travel, faculty stipends).

### 3. SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

#### Strengths:

- Prominently ranked program with potential to move up in national standing.
- Talented faculty committed to excellence in research, teaching, and outreach/engagement.
- Research characterized by methodological rigor and engagement with important issues (e.g., climate change, migration and demography, social justice, transportation, water resources, trade, racial and ethnic relations).
- High level of faculty and students participation at regional and national professional events. Students actively publish with faculty members.
- Culture of external research funding, with graduate students writing proposals to fund their thesis and dissertation research.
- Department encourages faculty and student participation in departmental governance.
- Department has its own building and good (albeit limited) facilities for research and teaching (relative to other departments at UT and other geography departments in the US).
- Undergraduate research is of growing importance. Undergraduates win prestigious scholarships and internships (NSF, NOAA, NASA, National Geographic, etc.).
- Department hosts the Tennessee Geographic Alliance, which supports over 5000 K-12 Tennessee teachers.
- Department hosts an excellent Cartographic Services Laboratory.
- Strong interdisciplinary, regional, national, and international connections.

#### Challenges:

- Limited space in Burchfiel Geography Building. Little room to accommodate an expanding faculty, offer more classes, provide adequate research space, or create enough GTA offices.
- Teaching loads for faculty members, especially those in natural-science area, are heavier than those of counterparts in other departments.
- Staff and technical support inadequate to meet needs of a growing department.
- Graduate stipends not competitive with those of other universities. This impairs student recruitment and creates hardships for students in the program.
- Faculty and geography majors do not yet reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the state or nation.
- Shortage of tenured/tenure-track instructional capacity in human geography. Over-reliance on lecturers to teach 101 and certain high-demand, upper-division courses.
- Shortage of tenured/tenure-track instructional capacity in geospatial courses. Over-reliance on post-tenure and non-tenure-track personnel to teach key geospatial courses.

- Lack of a permanent funding source for visiting speakers and student professional travel.
- Faculty-staff relations and work environment, especially in times of stress, need improvement.

Opportunities:

- Faculty lines opened by retirements and other departures. (Permission for replacement increasingly depends on objectively demonstrated need but this should not be problem for the Department.)
  - Strong collaborations with other programs on campus, which can become the basis of new joint-faculty appointments. Department has a good record with such appointments.
  - Department's productive faculty and recent hires in climate science and remote sensing create strong potential for moving up in the ranks of research-intensive, Ph.D.-granting geography departments.
  - Collaborative relationships with ORNL (which include joint faculty and joint student support and mentoring) have potential for strengthening.
  - Curriculum revisions in accord with the new College curriculum, and especially with its "connections" component, will allow the Department to better respond to student needs and incorporate more disciplinary advances into our curriculum.
  - Department has broad network of alumni and supporters who can, if properly motivated, significantly increase their financial support and advocacy for the Department.
  - Opportunity to develop a career-enhancing GIS certificate program within Department. (University-based GIS certificate programs are increasingly widespread.)
  - Opportunities for campus-wide efforts to attract majors, particularly minority students. (Early and enhanced recruitment of undergraduate geography majors will grow with changes in College curriculum and the university's increasing emphasis on student retention.)
  - Public school and teacher networks affiliated with the Tennessee Geographic Alliance offers opportunities to reach more potential majors while they are still in high school.
  - Junior faculty members in human geography are achieving significant scholarly productivity and recognition, creating an opportunity for the human geography program to shape its national identity and use future hires to capitalize on its achievement.
  - Department in a good position to capitalize on the emergence of climate and environmental change as a major issue. New research, teaching, and leadership opportunities abound for geographers in this area.
- Opportunities to develop courses that integrate physical and human geography. Student interest in such integrated courses is demonstrated by high enrollment in the Department's extant integrated courses as well as by the proliferation of similarly integrated courses elsewhere on campus.

#### 4. STRATEGIC GOALS

##### **Goal 1: Increase the quality, quantity, and reach of Department's research.**

*Strategy 1.1:* Increase tenure-track faculty to 22 full-time members.

*Strategy 1.2:* Monitor peer and aspiration-level geography PhD programs for trends in curriculum development, research foci, recruitment strategies, teaching workloads, and research expectations. Also monitor for size of faculty and graduate-student cohort, as well as number of undergraduate majors.

*Strategy 1.3:* Continue to build departmental culture of published, externally funded research among faculty and students (undergraduate and graduate).

*Strategy 1.4:* Encourage faculty and student involvement in interdisciplinary research initiatives on campus and beyond.

*Strategy 1.5:* Nominate more faculty and student researchers for prestigious awards in geography and related disciplines.

*Strategy 1.6:* Mount a gift-giving campaign to establish permanent fund for: (1) honoraria and travel expenses for visiting speakers; (2) laboratory and technology improvements; and (3) stipend awards for outstanding faculty achievement.

*Strategy 1.7:* Acquire adequate space for all faculty members, graduate assistants, and departmental operations. Conduct a building-space inventory to determine Department's space needs over the next five years and to guide reallocation of BGB space and acquisition of new space.

##### **Goal 2: Sustain balance among and within Department's human-geography, physical-geography, and geospatial-analysis programs.**

*Strategy 2.1:* Use new faculty hires to strengthen and balance the department's expertise in human geography, physical geography, and geospatial analysis. Assuming no unexpected faculty departures, the department sets forth the following hiring priorities:

1. GIS/Geospatial Analysis – The geospatial group has developed a suite of courses that meets demand from many parts of the campus and conducts widely recognized research. The Department needs to capitalize on these successes and further develop geospatial focus to become a top-ten geography department. The geospatial-analysis teaching program is short-handed, however. Essential courses are taught by post-retirement and non-tenure-track instructors. Several of members of the GIS faculty group divide their teaching between GIS/Geospatial Analysis and physical or human geography courses (Kim, Li, Tran, and Washington-Allen) or between geography and ORNL (Nagle). Instructional shortage has been exacerbated by personnel changes. Meeting instructional demands without additional faculty lines is difficult

and will become even more so when a GIS certificate program is established. To fully cover instructional demand for GIS/Geospatial courses (from geography and from other UT programs), the Department would need two additional faculty lines and the conversion of the 50/50 joint faculty line with ORNL to 100% geography.

2. Human Geography – Following the sudden death of Dr. John Rehder, the Department has heavily relied on lecturers to teach Geography 101 and some upper-division human geography courses. The College and the Department want tenured/tenure-track faculty members to teach upper division courses under normal circumstances. The human geography group identified a need for a geographer with specializations increasingly needed by students in their thesis/dissertation research (e.g., political geography, urban cultural geography, political economy). A hire that is proficient in one or more of these areas will help the human geography group stay current with theoretical, methodological, and topical developments within the discipline.

3. Physical Geography – The approaching retirement of Dr. Carol Harden, a national leader in geography and an expert on watershed dynamics and a key player in the watershed minor, creates an important intellectual and programmatic void to be filled. The use and misuse of water has become an important interdisciplinary focus on campus, one in which the Department actively participates. The Department wishes to have a faculty line that continues this participation and Harden's expertise as well as shouldering her teaching and advising responsibilities. It is also recognized that the physical geography program is also in need of a second faculty line to strengthen the Department's focus on fluvial geomorphology, human-environment interaction, and biogeography-landscape geography. Expertise in these areas is found in major PhD granting programs.

### **Goal 3: Improve quality of the graduate-student program and experience.**

*Strategy 3.1:* Increase the number of teaching assistantships (GTAs) and graduate research assistantships (GRAs).

*Strategy 3.2:* Increase professional development opportunities and programming for graduate students, including but not limited to public speaking/presentation, peer observation/coaching of teaching, and preparation for job search and interview and hiring negotiation.

*Strategy 3.2:* Take greater advantage of graduate teaching assistantships by creating more opportunities for laboratory-, inquiry-, and experience-based learning within courses. This will also enhance graduate-student pedagogical training.

*Strategy 3.3:* Increase placement of Department's PhD recipients in foremost geography programs. Steps to this end include enhancing UT Geography's reputation, ensuring that students publish in highly visible outlets, win regional and national awards, and participate in professional meetings and specialty groups of the Association of

American Geographers. These activities will help students enter professional issue networks and interpretive communities.

*Strategy 3.4:* Bring graduate-student stipends up to competitive levels. Higher stipends for both new and continuing students will provide them with a more livable wage and will improve the Department's ability to compete for top graduate students.

*Strategy 3.5:* Grow the McCroskey Fund through a fund-raising campaign. This will allow it to support more student research travel and fieldwork as well as conference travel not covered by other university and departmental sources. Establish another development fund to assist students with research-related travel.

#### **Goal 4: Improve undergraduate program and the undergraduate experience.**

*Strategy 4.1:* Increase the number of students majoring in Geography through greater campus visibility and more outreach to K-12 schools and homeschool programs.

*Strategy 4.2:* Regularly include geography information sessions and promotion efforts in introductory courses (101, 201, 131/137, and 132). Market degree and job opportunities with a brochure. Host a university-wide geography-awareness program during National Geography Awareness Week (mid-November). Take advantage of social media and the Internet to promote geography. Host information tables at key locations and campus events.

*Strategy 4.3:* Encourage undergraduate and graduate students to mix more by hosting joint activities cosponsored by the undergraduate Club Geography and the Graduate Association of Research Geographers, the graduate student organization. (The national geographic honor society, Gamma Theta Upsilon, is a potential bridge between graduate and undergraduate students, but the campus chapter requires energizing.)

*Strategy 4.4:* Enhance the undergraduates' sense of being part of the Department. Club Geography and GTU can help strengthening undergraduate participation in the life of the department as well as increase the undergraduate presence on the Department's web page and bulletin boards and at the department's colloquium series.

*Strategy 4.5:* Improve professional and academic preparation of undergraduate majors. Further steps to this end could include discussing career opportunities at Club Geography and GTU meetings; encouraging majors to develop individual career plans with advisors; involving more students in research (including Geography 494); identifying and promoting internship opportunities for majors; identifying and developing opportunities for study abroad; and using the departmental website to link undergraduates to career information. Helping majors early (i.e., sophomore year) and often in their career planning will benefit students and increase the value of their degrees.

### **Goal 5: Develop a GIS certificate program.**

*Strategy 5.1:* Department's GIS certificate committee will develop a proposal for a certificate in GIS that takes into consideration the needs of our graduate and undergraduate students, the wider needs of the university, and the possibilities of marketing the certificate program as a stand-alone training experience. The committee will determine the personnel and other requirements of its recommendation. With faculty approval the department will takes steps necessary to implement the program.

### **Goal 6: Improve Department as a workplace and community.**

*Strategy 6.1:* Use new advisory board to strengthen connections with alumni. Improve electronic communication with same.

*Strategy 6.2:* Offer more social events that bring faculty and students together. Make annual awards ceremonies more inclusive of alumni and all students, undergraduate and graduate.

*Strategy 6.3:* Meet increased workloads with adequate increases in support personnel. Add new staff to assist faculty with grant and curriculum development, laboratory supervision, and management of computer/technology infrastructure. (Unlike other science departments on campus, management of labs and computer rooms falls on faculty members. This takes faculty away from research and teaching preparation and adds to workplace stress.)

*Strategy 6.4:* Institutionalize diversity enhancement goals within Department. Do so by organizing recruiting events for students from under-represented groups and by participating in university-sponsored faculty recruitment initiatives like the Future Faculty Program. Invite members of under-represented groups to present their work in the Department's colloquium series. Perhaps establish a Lillian Stimson Memorial Lecture to host campus visits by accomplished female geographers.

## **5. IMPLEMENTATION**

This strategic plan is intended to guide the department for approximately five years (2014–2019) and possibly longer, but it will be reexamined occasionally during that period. The first reexamination will take place after the department's program review in 2014, when faculty and students reexamine departmental priorities and goals in light of reviewers' comments and recommendations.