

Department of Geography
Academic Unit Plan Summary
January 2022

The Academic Unit Planning process for the Department of Geography was initiated by CIAP in 2019. The department undertook its self-study process in the Spring and Fall of 2019, and submitted its Self-study Report in February 2020. Subsequent pandemic travel restrictions meant that the Review Panel visit was conducted virtually, but largely successfully, in the fall of 2020. The department received the Panel Report in July 2021 and began the process of formulating the response and action plan in September. We would like to thank the review panelists, CIAP, and the Dean of HSS for their participation, support, and feedback during this somewhat disrupted and unusual process.

Self-study Report highlights:

Key findings and messages from the Department's self-study report include:

- The department continues to maintain a culture of strategic planning
- The department is successfully pursuing ongoing curriculum innovation and renovation in its undergraduate program, with positive benefits for enrolment
- Geography hosts the largest graduate program in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and enjoys considerable success in student recruitment and achievement
- The department is a research leader at Memorial University, with ample success in research funding, scholarly publishing, and research impact
- Faculty renewal over the 2011-19 period contributed significantly to the maintenance and growth of the department's research and teaching success
- University budget cuts and expanding workloads result in challenges for the department's critical administrative and professional support staff
- The recent departure of three faculty members in Geographical Information Sciences (GIS) presents an urgent challenge for the department's ability to offer a comprehensive undergraduate and graduate Geography program
- Anticipated near-future retirements of physical geography faculty will compound the difficulties presented by the loss of GIS faculty, if unaddressed
- Although a move to new facilities is anticipated in coming years, the department struggles with its current office, laboratory, and teaching space due to quality and safety concerns in the Science Building.

Panel Report

The review panel consisted of: Dr. Greg Dunning (chair), Department of Earth Sciences, Memorial; Dr. Paul Marino, Department of Biology, Memorial; and Dr. Nadine Schuurman, Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University; and Dr. Dianne Draper, Department of Geography, University of Calgary. In its report, the panel remarked on how Memorial Geography "significantly outperforms many comparable departments in Canada" and is notable for its strong faculty cohesion and student satisfaction. They noted that "Geography is perhaps the most 'interdisciplinary' department at Memorial University and the strongest such department in Atlantic Canada." The panel also noted the critical importance of Geography to addressing provincial training and research needs.

The panel (and students it heard from) remarked on the high quality of teaching in the department, describing the undergraduate program as "vigorous" and "nationally competitive." The panel recognized Geography's vital contribution to student training outside the unit as well, in particular through its

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Geographical Information Science offerings, as well as its many cross-listed courses and contributions to interdisciplinary diplomas and programs across Memorial's campuses. These contributions are, however, imperiled by recent and looming reductions in faculty complement, a situation the panel highlighted in the strongest terms.

The panel report emphasized the very strong research profile of the department, noting it “has the research strength and funding profile of departments in the Faculty of Science.” The continuation of this success, the panel suggested, requires further support from the university related to student funding levels, the inadequacy of space (both in size and quality), administrative support needs, and faculty complement to support balanced graduate program offerings and research activity (particularly as it affects physical geography). The report also highlighted the department's strong reputation and diverse engagements within and beyond the university. Geographers, working with collaborators from other academic units across Memorial, “address issues across discipline boundaries” on topics of local and global public interest.

The panel's key recommendations included:

1. Support for continuity in GIS and physical geography through two immediate faculty hires
2. Confirmation of the planning and timeline for relocation of Geography out of the Science Building to new and appropriate space
3. Support for the department's research excellence through: a) realistic teaching loads, b) a clear plan and criteria for teaching reductions for faculty with major/demanding research initiatives, c) a review of main office complement towards possible new position.

Action Plan

The panel's recommendations address a number of issues beyond the direct control of the department. However, we have identified actions and strategies to undertake to support the administration's response while continuing our longstanding processes of responding to challenges and changes. We also identified additional specific actions we can undertake to enhance departmental strengths and priorities, arrayed under the following general objectives:

- Advocating and planning for faculty/program renewal in our GIS and physical geography programs, by establishing a GIS renewal committee and working with other units across the university with GIS teaching resources and requirements
- Addressing teaching and research balance to achieve realistic teaching loads; requires a clear plan and criteria for teaching reductions to support research, while ensuring sustainability of program offerings across the department's programs (BA/MA, BSc/MSc, GIS Diploma, PhD)
- Reviewing main office complement and admin/technical staff resources
- Confirming and planning for relocation to space allocated to Geography outside the Science Building
- Fostering and promoting links with other units across and beyond Memorial University
- Reviewing the reputation and identity of Geography within the university
- Supporting continued graduate student and graduate program success
- Enhancing opportunities for undergraduate research training