



UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

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Franklin College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Geography

December 22, 2022

Dean Alan Dorsey
Franklin College of Arts and Sciences
Old College
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

Dear Dean Dorsey,

I write to formally submit a proposal for a change of the name of the Department of Geography to the Department of Geography, Society, and Environment. The proposal form and justification are attached.

Sincerely,

Hilda Kurtz
Department Head

PROPOSAL FOR ACADEMIC UNIT NAME CHANGE

Date: Dec 22, 2022

Department/Division: Department of Geography

School/College/Unit: Franklin College of Arts and Sciences

Proposed Effective Date: July 1, 2023

NAME CHANGE:

Current Name: Department of Geography

Proposed Name: Department of Geography, Society and Environment

JUSTIFICATION:

Attach a justification and rationale for the requested changes, and include any relevant documentation. If this change is in response to an accreditation body, please include that language in the proposal.

Justification is attached.

APPROVALS:

Attach documentation of approval from all involved units.

Results of unit-level faculty vote is attached in Justification.

Justification for Proposed Name Change
of the Department of Geography
to the Department of Geography, Society, and Environment
University of Georgia
December 22, 2022
Submitted by Dr. Hilda Kurtz, Department Head

Overview

Following thorough study and evaluation within the department led by an Ad Hoc Name Change Committee (Marshall Shepherd, chair, Deepak Mishra, Jennifer Rice), the faculty of the Department of Geography at the University of Georgia voted 15-5-1 on November 9, 2022 to change the name of our academic unit from the Department of Geography to the Department of Geography, Society, and Environment.

Rationale

Geography is a ‘discovery discipline’ that very few UGA undergraduate students have encountered in their previous education. It is also a dynamic discipline, with strong interdisciplinary connections to other social and environmental sciences. Yet the conceptual and analytical range of contemporary work in geography is virtually invisible to undergraduate students, as evidenced in a relatively modest number of majors in a department which offers a wealth of opportunities for learning, research, and career-building. It seems clear that our invisibility or illegibility to undergraduate students limits our ability to recruit, retain and educate the next generation of geographers.

The name *Department of Geography, Society and Environment* offers the most succinct language with which to capture the breadth of geographic scholarship. It clearly communicates to those outside of academia the nature of the work we do in this unit, indicating the topmost domains of geographic research, “society” and “environment”. Every single member of the department studies elements of society and/or environment through a geographically informed lens, whether that lens be geospatial science and technology, geomorphology, climatology, political ecology, etc. Using terms that are more legible to undergraduate students (and countless other stakeholders) than the word “Geography” on its own, the proposed name substantially represents the discipline(s) which comprise this academic unit.

Regarding the term “environment” in the proposed name, we wish to underscore that “environment” is a supple and capacious construct that is already used to signal the purpose and scope of several other units of the University of Georgia, including the Department of Environmental Health Sciences (School of Public Health), the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, the College of Environment and Design, and numerous courses across several colleges. Just as there is no singular “environment”, there should be no one institutional claim to the construct at this large and variegated university. In the Department of Geography, 26% of our courses include the term environment or environmental in the course name and/or course description; 22% of our courses include the terms social, society or cultural in the course name and/or course description. At the same time, 100% of our courses engage

students with learning about elements of society, environment, or both. We intend to continue in a process of changing course names to better reflect course content.

Discernment Process

The 16-month process led by the Ad Hoc Name Change Committee included research into comparands, an internal survey, two formal full faculty discussions of results, and two listening sessions. The committee was guided in part by insights reported by Stoler et al. (2021) on undergraduate perceptions of geography. Stoler et al.'s (2021) survey of 4,388 undergraduate students at four U.S. universities found that students “overwhelmingly and consistently preferred simple, thematic types of terms to those that sounded more technical or science oriented. Forms of the word geography were rated significantly lower than words or phrases containing environment and sustainability. Forms of geography that included the word science were rated particularly low” (Stoler et al. 2021:317).

The Name Change Committee collected information by email from peer and aspirational programs that have modified their names in recent years. Responses to inquiries indicated that a name change was considered in these departments to be an effective means of attracting interest and/or increasing undergraduate majors. The Committee conducted a survey of faculty and graduate students in the Department of Geography; 44 respondents included 21 faculty members, 22 graduate students and 1 unspecified. Survey results indicated broad support (73%) for a name change. Survey responses shaped the committee’s approach to the remainder of the process, indicating that

- Geography must remain first and the primary focus
- The name must be crisp and high impact rather than a laundry list
- A balance must be found between a name that reflects graduate/faculty perspectives versus the realities of undergraduate recruiting/perceptions

The committee reviewed the names of several peer and aspirational Geography programs, and identified a small list of words incorporated into revised department names. Society and Environment were among the most frequently used such words. Exemplars include: University of Minnesota, Department of Geography, Environment and Society; University of Texas at Austin, Department of Geography & the Environment; Syracuse University, Geography and the Environment Department; Villanova University, Department of Geography and the Environment; and University of Oklahoma, Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability.

A fulsome discussion of the survey results was held at the August 2022 faculty retreat, at which point the committee signaled that it would likely include broad terms such as society, environment and/or sustainability in the proposal for a change to the name of the academic unit. Seeking inclusivity across various forms of social, physical, geospatial, and integrative research programs and courses, while avoiding a long and unwieldy name for the department, the committee recommended the name Geography, Society, and Environment in late September. At the October faculty meeting, discussion was held on the pros and cons of incorporating terms at a such a high domain level, and not naming the many more specific domains in which our faculty conduct research and instruction. Two listening sessions were

conducted on October 26th and 27th to gather additional feedback. These were important and valuable discussions, but did not change the committee's recommendation to use the more encompassing terms 'society' and 'environment' in the proposed name.

Complementary Initiatives to Grow Majors

Changing the name of the department should be understood in the context of a suite of changes to recruit more students into the major(s), including curricular, programmatic and communications innovations.

Curricular changes include:

- Adding areas of emphasis to the major (2011-2021)
- Launching certificate programs, in a) Geographic Information Science and b) Urban and Metropolitan Studies and c) Atmospheric Sciences
- Adding a B.S. in Atmospheric Sciences (CIP CODE) which has seen steady growth (2011)
- Creating a capstone course for the Atmospheric Sciences major (launched 2022)
- Creating a capstone course for the Geography majors (A.B. and B.S) (launched 2018)
- Revising course scheduling processes to better meet student needs (2021)

Programmatic changes include:

- Launching an internship program (2020)
- Enhancing an annual awards ceremony for undergraduates (2020)
- Adding an in-house graduation ceremony (2020)

Communications changes include:

- Establishing a communication coordinator position which supports regular multimedia communication about faculty and student work and accomplishments (2020)

These enhancements improve the programmatic quality of the department as a learning and working environment, and position the department well for future growth. The proposed name change would create opportunities for more students to "discover" Geography and our various degrees, programs, and certificates, by signaling the two key domains of geographic study and research: Society and Environment.

References

Justin Stoler, Diana Ter-Ghazaryan, Ira Sheskin, Amber L. Pearson, Gary Schnakenberg, Dominique Cagalan, Kate Swanson & Piotr Jankowski (2021) What's in a Name? Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Geography, Environment, and Sustainability Key Words and Program Names, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111:2, 317-342, DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2020.1766412