

**UAS Geography and Environmental Studies BA
Program Assessment Report
Academic Year 2016-2017**

September 1st, 2018
Richard Simpson
Bachelor of Arts Coordinator

1. Program Overview

Faculty List

Richard Simpson, Assistant Professor of Humanities
Dan Monteith, Associate Professor of Anthropology
Glenn Wright, Associate Professor of Social Science
Forest Wagner, Assistant Professor and Program Director of Outdoor Studies
Kevin Maier, Associate Professor of English
Lora Vess, Assistant Professor of Sociology
X'uncie Twitchell, Associate Professor of Alaska Native Languages
Eran Hood, Professor of Environmental Science
Sanjay Pyare, Associate Professor of Environmental Science
Brian Buma, Assistant Professor of Forest Ecology
Sonia Nagorski, Assistant Professor of Geology
Jon Radizloski, Assistant Professor of History

The Geography and Environmental Studies program provides a unique interdisciplinary place-based approach to education, not only to emphasize enculturation and human development with the well-being of community, but also to provide our students with the irreplaceable experiences and collaborative skill sets required to compete in today's job market. Linked by a common interest in landscape and the environment in all its forms, the classes composing this degree specifically engage the theoretical, historical, and cultural dimensions of society in fields as diverse as political science, economics, law, media studies, indigenous studies, and literature. The program also provides a geographic focus on the regions of Alaska and the Arctic and prepares students for careers in management, policy, teaching, field-based research, and regional planning. The Geography and Environmental Studies program at UAS is the only program within the UA system that offers students an interdisciplinary design to environmental themes across courses within Natural Science, Social Science, and the Humanities.

2. Program Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the conclusion of the BA in Geography and Environmental Studies, students will be able to:

- 1) Use qualitative and quantitative research techniques to gather and analyze data on social, cultural, and ecological problems.
- 2) Use clear written and oral communication skills to communicate the results of research.
- 3) Demonstrate connections between everyday life at the local scale and the larger economic, social, and/or environmental forces that network them into a global community.
- 4) Evaluate cultural, social, and environmental processes with a particular focus on space and place, critical theory, practical application, analysis and/or social justice.

3. Overview of the Data Collected on the Program SLOs during AY 2016-2017

At convocation in the Fall of 2018, Geography faculty met to review student work on assignments across core courses in our program. These selected student assignments and projects demonstrate our students' mastery (or not) of the above stated Program Student Learning Outcomes as a guiding rubric. Prior to our convocation meeting, faculty members completed assessment reports addressing student performances (success and limits) on chosen assignments as a means to assess how their course assignments specifically addresses our Program SLOs. The data from Individual faculty assessment reports on select assignments are available with the Geography BA Coordinator.

At our convocation meeting in August 2018, faculty shared the individual results of their assignment and assessments of how they achieved program SLOs. They then participated in a comprehensive discussion regarding the results, including trends, observations, evaluation of student work with the intention of assessing whether or not students are meeting our outcomes. The cross-department discussion provided a window into the depth of skill sets and diverse tasks undertaken by students within our interdisciplinary program. Given the result of these findings faculty discussed ways to improve student success toward achieving our Program SLOs, address adjustments to our courses, our evaluating assignments, and/or our overall program itself.

Given that this was the first year using our new Program SLOs we were unable compare the result of this data to the previous years' data to identify patterns and developments in the program. However a strong baseline was established in our initial review discussion. As a result, moving forward in our annual assessments we will now be able to recognize and address larger historical trends in SLO achievement.

4. Evaluation of the data collected on the Program SLOs and Future Plans to Improve Student Learning

SLO's #1 and #2

After sharing each other's findings on assignment assessments, we found a high level of achievement from Students on SLOs #1 and #2. While assignments across the three departments resulted in differentiation regarding quantitative and qualitative research analysis, the combined effect was faculty reporting a high level of student success on *utilizing qualitative and quantitative research techniques to gather and analyze data on social, cultural, and ecological problems*. This was largely the result of faculty scaffolding of assignments and the introduction of research skills in classwork for the assignment. Faculty also found a high level of success on student demonstrations of *clear written and oral communication skills to communicate the results of research*. Geography students across several courses were identified as having strong communication skills in oral presentations and written summaries of their research as a result of extensive modeling of these practices from faculty and from courses across the UAS curriculum.

SLO's #3 and #4

Our discussion of this year's assignments indicated mixed results on the findings of SLO's #3 and #4. Regarding SLO #3, which addresses student ability to relate scales of geographic knowledge from the local to the global, some faculty identified great success in student achievement on this assignment, while the majority of faculty felt that while their assignment may have mentioned this relationship and certainly could have done so, it was not a key component of the results of the

assignment nor specifically addressed in the assignment as such. Similar findings were identified in SLO #4. Some faculty reported “great” success and “somewhat” successful in this SLO, most faculty members felt that improvement was necessary in achievement toward student *evaluation of cultural, social, and environmental processes with a particular focus on space and place, critical theory, practical application, analysis and/or social justice*.

Upon discussion, faculty found that the initial source of this deficiency is the obvious one that we are working with a new set of SLOs that were developed after the courses were offered to students in AY 16-17. Faculty strongly felt that the new SLOs were accurate and that this assessment process serve as a successful process for improving our program. In response to this exercise of examining coursework and assignments through the lens of our new Program SLOs, faculty felt they now had a means to change these assignments so as to better address Student Learning Outcomes within our program. In addition to altering and strengthening assignments to align with the Outcomes, faculty discussed overall desires to redesign syllabi with these outcomes and ideas in mind. Doing so will provide stronger coherency and identity to the program as faculty develop a means to identify ways their own courses bridge with other courses across the curriculum via the shared goals of the interdisciplinary outcomes of SLOs #3 and #4. Faculty will be placing an emphasis on improving assignments to specifically address student achievement in scaling capacity as well as evaluating processes with a particular focus on space and place, critical theory, practical application, analysis and/or social justice. This will be done through a range of practices including emphasis in class discussions, the incorporation of new reading materials, and the adjustment of syllabi to address these outcomes.

Finally, given that this was our first trial with the new Program SLOs and annual assessment procedures, we also used our convocation meeting to discuss ways to improve this assessment process next year. Faculty learned much from the process of sharing and discussing student success and limits in achieving the SLOs through chosen assignments in the program. This interdisciplinary discussion was fruitful to understanding both the specific kind of work students are performing in each other’s courses as well as a stronger sense of the comprehensive effect of this work across departments could be. In addition to repeating this process next year, faculty agreed to develop a template sheet for the assessment of our core assignments in the program, as well as to add a quantifiable score to each SLO in addition to the written component of the assignment assessment so as to identify trends on a numerical basis.

5. Geography Capstone Student Assessment Evaluations

As part of the annual assessment procedure, the instructor of GEOG 490 Geography Seminar distributes a form to students in this course as a means to acquire student perception and feedback about the Geography BA program. Richard Simpson led the capstone senior seminar (GEOG 490) in Spring 2017. He distributed the revised self-assessment survey to all students in the course to ascertain Geography B.A. and B.S. seniors’ assessment of themselves in the categories designated in the then-current Program Learning Outcomes. Six students were enrolled in the seminar of which two graduated in Spring 2017, two will graduate in Fall 2017, and two will graduate in Spring 2018. Five of the students are acquiring degrees in the Geography B.A. program; one student is acquiring a degree in the Geography B.S. program. Note: Moving forward, the SLOs on this form will need to be updated to reflect the new SLOs in the Spring of 2019.

Geography BA Program Assessment 2016 Student Reporting

Scale

1=very well

6=very poor

This table reflects scores of the B.A students in the Spring 2017 GEOG 490 capstone:

	Student self-assess	Instructor assess
Student demonstrates effective oral and written communication	1.1	3
Student demonstrates quantitative skills	1.6	3
Student demonstrates critical thinking	1.6	2.8
Student demonstrates information literacy in research	2.4	3.8
Student demonstrates computer literacy	4.2	5.2
Student demonstrates professional behavior	1	3.8

Positive Aspects Reported

Professors care about their study, their community, and student well-being.

Small classes develop interpersonal skills

Abundant one-on-one time with professors

Interdisciplinary coursework connects to a multitude of subjects.

Professors are supportive and passionate about student success

Combination of course work and hands-on learning

Program produced both a local consciousness and a global consciousness

The Geography BA is a “life-changing degree.”

Negative Aspects Reported

Frustration regarding lack of availability of classes.

Expensive textbooks

Access to school GIS data and no platform to save GIS work if not enrolled in a GIS class and GIS software requires update.

Future Goals Reported

Health and wellness guide on national geographic expeditions

Environmental Sustainability coordinator

Teaching people about the importance of environment on local and global scale through Guiding

GIS internship at Bureau of Land Management in Safford, Arizona

Forest Service and the Nature Conservancy

Instructor Summary

Compared to last year’s capstone assessment evaluation, BA students are showing *self-assessment* improvement in all categories with the exception of computer literacy. Of note, is particular improvement in the categories of critical thinking and oral/written communication, which were the two lowest scoring categories reported in AY 2015-2016. Compared to last year’s *instructor assessment*, students show improvement in quantitative skills, critical thinking, and professional behavior, with a slight decrease in research skills and professional behavior. The largest decrease compared to last year is in the category of computer literacy. Instructor evaluation and student self-evaluation reveal similar trends of inadequate computer literacy skills. Details regarding GIS and computer literacy insufficiencies were also recorded in the collection of negative aspects of the program noted above.

Instructor assessment identified a need to improve computer literacy skills in GIS and develop humanist approaches to geographic technology platforms. Faculty were alerted to these results in meetings and encouraged to emphasize research skills, computer literacy techniques, and professional behavior in their specific courses.

Overall the assessment shows students value the interdisciplinary coursework, small class size, the quality of professor instruction and interaction, and the direct relevance of their coursework to local and global social issues. Students again report frustration with the limited availability of Geography courses. These responses from students affirm the imperative to revise the curriculum so as to strengthen the interdisciplinary core of the program and at the same time developing easy routes to course availability and graduation within four years. Faculty have collaborated to submit curriculum revisions in the Fall of 2017 to directly address these issues.

5. Program Assessment Conclusions

The quality of student-professor interaction, immediate relevance of coursework to both contemporary social issues and professional careers, and interdisciplinary integrity remain the strengths of students' success and appeal of the Geography BA program. The number of declared students as well as our retention rates have continued to increase this academic year. Faculty are also pleased to find the program continues to prepare UAS students for achieving their professional goals and offering them a heightened sense of purpose as scholars, practitioners, and global citizens.

The Five-Year Review was executed to complete satisfaction of the faculty and received unanimous support for continuation of the program from the Institutional Review Committee. Included in the Five-Year Report is a set of recommendations in response to faculty self-assessment of the Geography program over the past two years. Our recommendations include a curriculum that positions Geography and Environmental Studies at the intersection of local and global issues; offers students a robust interdisciplinary course of study; builds upon the opportunity to make cultural and human geographic analysis a distinctive strength of our campus; and introduces a means of increasing appeal, flexibility, and marketability of the program through a community scholars initiative and a Cultural Geography Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Geography BA faculty representatives from Natural Science, Social Science, and Humanities plan to share our revised interdisciplinary Geography BA curriculum, along with revised Program Learning Outcomes and Assessment Methods, at each of their respective department meetings (Natural Science, Social Science, and Humanities) in order to finalize the courses, confirm frequency within a two-year sequence for all core courses, and address potential impacts on any departments and programs. All final adjustments to the Geography BA curriculum will be made with the intent of submitting final paperwork to Curriculum Committee on October 1st, 2017.

Given student feedback and instructor assessment from the Geography Seminar, prioritizing *course accessibility in the program* and *completion within a four-year timeline* remains fundamental to our revised curriculum. On an individual course level, assignments and learning activities that facilitate computer literacy, research skills, and professional behavior will be emphasized within geography courses. Additional improvements to computer literacy skills in GIS in the current program will be conducted by emphasizing computer literacy techniques and exploring opportunities in digital humanist geographic platforms. Team teaching, cross-department classroom visitations, and further interdisciplinary collaboration with Alaskan Native Studies and with faculty across the curriculum will enhance the place-based interdisciplinary emphasis of the program.

Finally, in order to improve student familiarity and recruitment in Geography and Environmental Studies, faculty recommend that the UAS Geography website update its online presence. In the following academic year, the content, curriculum, student employment and accomplishments, and Geography community activities should all be regularly maintained and developed so as report and advertise the current activities of Geography and Environmental Studies at UAS to the local and global communities of cultural geographic scholars and practitioners. Doing so will contribute to UAS's appeal as a prime destination for interdisciplinary study in Alaska and beyond.

6. Additional Program Information

The Geography B.A. faculty met multiple times over the course of the year. This year the Geography B.A. and B.S. degree programs undertook a Five-Year Program Review headed by Richard Simpson, Brian Buma, Dan Monteith, Kevin Maier, and Sanjay Pyare. In the fall semester, several of our faculty meetings were dedicated to gathering details from faculty regarding program history and progress; determining program support through library holdings, facilities, and professional development; analyzing summative data packets on faculty profiles, student profiles, and program costs; discussing the strengths and weaknesses of our program; and updating our program design according to findings and discussions identified in last year's meetings and outlined in the Geography B.A. Program Assessment Report of AY 2015-2016 (See Section 1 and Section 5).

Program Issues and Updates

Members of the Geography B.A. program met several times specifically to include within our Five-Year Review a detailed and comprehensive set of recommendations regarding the Geography B.A. curriculum design, program learning outcomes, and assessment methods that accurately fit both new faculty strengths and new student demands. These recommendations, included in the Five-Year Review, reflect the combined work and effort of the Geography B.A. faculty, representing all three UAS departments (Natural Science, Social Science and Humanities), and this faculty group envision the curriculum as a strong model for future interdisciplinary endeavors at both the program and university-wide level. Developing our curriculum was an exciting process given UAS's commitment to interdisciplinarity and recognition of the present moment as a perfect opportunity to position cultural approaches to geography and environment as a unique strength of UAS campus identity. Our endeavor to update and strengthen the curriculum directly addresses the clear student demand for increased understanding in spatial politics and processes at local, regional, and global scales; the acquisition of new faculty with specializations in interdisciplinary place-based methodologies; the expansion of tourism and its salient impacts on the economy, landscape, and cultures of Southeast Alaska; and finally the need to articulate specific strengths in environmental interdisciplinarity in accordance with the UA Strategic Pathways initiative.

Necessary improvements to the Geography program include updating new content, presence, and resources to the Geography BA website in an effort to celebrate and advertise student accomplishments. To remain competitive in geo-visual data analysis, the Geography BA program will work to improve student competency of computer literacy skills in GIS and the interpretation of data analysis. The collaborative interdisciplinary effort of the students in the 2016 Geography senior seminar course (GEOG 490) was awarded a research grant from the Juneau-Douglas City museum for an online virtual research project tracing the historical impact of Cruise ship tourism on Southeast Alaska.