

Annual Report on the Status of Geography in Virginia, 2003-2004
November 21, 2004

Helen Ruth Aspaas, Virginia Commonwealth University

Fourteen geography programs or individual geography instructors responded to the annual survey report. Of these, one came from a junior college instructor, four came from instructors who are housed in departments or programs other than geography, one came from a program that offers a minor in geography, six came from programs that offer a B.A. or B.S. in geography and one came from the only institution in Virginia that offers a masters degree in geography (excluding George Mason University that is affiliated with the Mid-Atlantic Division.) The total enrollment of students in undergraduate geography courses ranged from 70 to 1500. The mean enrollment was 760 students per institution for the past year. The number of courses taught ranged from 6 to 48 and the mean was 20 courses per year.

In those institutions that do not offer a degree, the geography courses are service courses for general education programs or education majors, and they fulfill requirements in specified majors. Among the institutions that offer an undergraduate degree, the range of majors was 43 to 115, and the mean was 62. Graduates of these programs are finding work in local, regional and national planning departments, in private consulting firms, in governmental agencies including FEMA, public lands management agencies, the CIA (and other intelligence gathering agencies), in state natural resource management offices and environmental protection agencies, in engineering firms and in private geospatial agencies. Some graduates have gone into international consulting and others move on into graduate school. Many reported that entry level GIS positions provide the most opportunities for their graduates.

Despite heavy teaching loads, the geography faculty in Virginia is continuing to successfully acquire competitive grants for domestic and international research, to publish in peer-review journals and to receive recognition for success in the classroom. Faculty have received NSF, USDA and Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation grants along with travel and research grants awarded by their institutions. Numerous publications in peer-review journals were noted. Dawn Bowen at Mary Washington received two awards for excellence in teaching. Christine Drake received one of the State Council on Higher Education (SCHEV) Teaching awards. David Hardin at Longwood used his Fulbright award for research and teaching in Croatia and Serbia, and Don Zeigler is co-author of the text Cities of the World.

The hiring outlook is more positive than in the past two years. Four additional new faculty have been hired and three more institutions have the expectation to hire during the next two academic years.

Geography is generally thriving in all the reporting institutions with classes filled each semester and demand for additional courses growing. GIS is increasingly viewed as an attractive aspect of the university curriculum. Unfortunately, one institution did report that geography will be withdrawn from the course offerings next year. The University of Richmond is in the process of expanding its academic offerings into interdisciplinary areas and has developed a minor in geography. Both faculty members have had significant success in bringing GIS-based learning to the university. Old Dominion University is buoyed by acceleration of its GIS program and a

growing job market in the Hampton Roads area. Two new certificate are proving to be successful, one in GIS and the second in spatial analysis of coastal environments. Longwood's geography program is playing a pivotal role in providing physical geography teaching and research. The Standards of Learning in the Commonwealth have helped to boost interest in geography at Liberty University. Geography remains strong at Emory and Henry College where the small faculty manages to teach over half of the school's enrollment thanks to the demand for service courses.

Restructuring has been highly beneficial for two institutions but challenging for a third. James Madison University's geography program is thriving as a consequence of its move into the School of Integrated Science and Technology. Collaborative teaching and research has evolved and the number of majors is now over 100. On a similar note, the move of Geography at VPI (Virginia Tech) into the College of Natural Resources has been extremely positive. Institutional support has increased and an interdisciplinary doctoral degree in geospatial and environmental analysis is being developed. Again collaborative research using GIS and GPS is highly successful. Three study abroad programs are also highly successful, not to mention the Virginia Geographic Alliance sponsored train-trip that retraces the route of Lewis and Clark.

The geography program at VCU and its parent department (Urban Studies and Planning) were moved into the newly created School of Government and Public Affairs in 2003. The status of the geography program remains unresolved. Administration of the program comes from one school while the courses, faculty and advising are housed in another.

In closing, the institutions reported a generally optimistic outlook for geography within their respective settings. Several institutions have had successful hiring experiences and have brought dynamic researchers into their programs. Efforts for integrating with other disciplines are proving to be successful avenues for increasing funding and enhancing research agendas. Increased enrollments, successful teaching and research endeavors, a growing recognition for the value of GIS as a research and analytical tool, and successful efforts to respond to student demands for diversified geography courses bode well for the future of geography in Virginia.