As many AAG members may have heard, last year the Geography Graduate Group (GGG) at the University of California, Davis faced termination. We are pleased to announce that our appeal of this decision succeeded and we will resume admitting students as normal for Fall 2011. We are grateful to the AAG Council and the many geography departments and individuals who supported our efforts. Here we provide some details of the process and describe the character of geography at UC Davis since it provides insights into some general strengths of, and challenges facing, our discipline.

Our university’s Graduate Council voted in October 2009 to close admissions and permanently discontinue the Geography Graduate Group. They expressed concerns about faculty retirements, student funding, and a set of proposed curriculum revisions created in response to a 2007 external review of our program. We designed the revisions to improve core training in key geographic concepts, theory, and methods, while allowing students to specialize in one of geography’s four emphases: Environmental Sciences; Methods, Models and GIS Science; Nature and Society; and People, Place and Region. The Graduate Council, which does not include any geographers, believed this curriculum lacked a “coherent identity” and would allow granting “personalized” degrees without unifying characteristics.

We immediately appealed Graduate Council’s decision. With the help of many UC Davis faculty members, students, and staff, we launched a vigorous defense, documenting the strengths of our program and demonstrating continued leadership of newer faculty members taking over from retiring senior colleagues. We further revised our curriculum, strengthening and expanding our core and reducing degree requirement complexity. By comparing our degree requirements and areas of emphasis with other top geography PhD programs, we showed that we were well within disciplinary norms. We further urged Graduate Council to submit our appeal to an external review. Graduate Council responded thoughtfully to our appeal, seeing the wisdom of soliciting advice on our program from geographers in other top programs nationwide. Three anonymous reviews returned with strong endorsements of our program. The ultimate result was Graduate Council’s unanimous recommendation to fully reinstate our program.

This process highlights some of the challenges we geographers face in communicating to non-geographers the answer to the perennial question, “what is geography?” Recent articles in The Annals include topics as disparate as mosquito management, reforestation, HIV/AIDS, gang rivalry, and “southern” identities. How do we explain the core of our discipline to non-geographers in compelling ways to create support for geographical work from other disciplines?

Geography at UC Davis has tried to address these issues for many years. To understand how, we must explain our unique structure. In the early 1990s, the Geography Department at UC Davis was closed. While the undergraduate major ended, in 1994 the geography graduate program was re-organized into a cross-departmental “graduate group” structure. Graduate groups, the norm for graduate education at UC Davis since the 1970s, are a significant innovation in interdisciplinary education. Core elements of graduate groups include an emphasis on shared research interests among faculty and students, flexibility to

The Southeastern Geographer Celebrates 50 Years

The Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers (SEDAAG) recently announced that its journal, The Southeastern Geographer, has published its 50th volume. According to SEDAAG’s President, Russell Ivy of the Florida Atlantic University, the organization has reached a significant milestone.

“In the last few years, our organization has taken the journal into new directions,” said Ivy. “The journal now comes out quarterly, and we have had some wonderful special issues on diverse subjects such as Puerto Rico, the contested memory of slavery, and small watersheds.”

Editors Robert Brinkmann and Graham Tobin of the University of South Florida memorialized the 50th anniversary of the journal’s publication by producing a special issue that examined one of the papers printed in the first issue. John Fraser Hart provides a personal and enlightening commentary on the paper, “Idle Rural Land Phenomena in Madison County, Georgia,” written by Merle Prunty and published in 1961.

The upcoming SEDAAG annual meeting, to be held in Birmingham, Alabama, November 21-23, will be its 65th. Submission of manuscripts for review are welcome and encouraged.

For more information on the journal, including instructions for authors, visit www.geography.vt.edu/sedaag/journal/journal.htm. In addition, authors may contact the journal’s editors directly at seg@cas.usf.edu.
Bellagio Center Residency Fellowships Support Research on Global Issues

Alec Murphy, Department of Geography, University of Oregon, and a past AAG president, has received a residency fellowship at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center to work on a book aimed at a general audience on the consequences of geographic illiteracy.

Murphy will hold the fellowship in May 2011. Building on, and expanding beyond, the recently released study that he chaired, Understanding the Changing Planet: Strategic Directions for the Geographical Sciences (National Academies Press, 2010), Murphy’s goal is to work on a book that will explore the political, social, and environmental consequences of the failure to think geographically about the world or to ask critical geographical questions about processes and events.

Located on Lake Como in northern Italy, the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center seeks to bring people together from diverse backgrounds and expertise “to promote innovation and impact on a wide range of global issues.” The Center regularly hosts major international conferences on questions of basic human survival, global health, climate and environment, urbanization, and social and economic security. Murphy’s fellowship is part of the Center’s residency program, which brings scholars, scientists, artists, journalists and writers to Bellagio for an uninterrupted period of work on projects in keeping with the Rockefeller Foundation’s vision. Over the fifty-year life of the program, residents at the Center have included a variety of prominent individuals, including George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Theodore White, John Deutch, Ann Markusen, Saul Bellow, Maya Angelou, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Joseph Heller, and Susan Sontag.

There is clear synergy between the work of many geographers and the goals of the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center. Over the past decade a number of geographers have received Bellagio Center residency fellowships, including Jennifer Wolch, Michael Dear, Judith Carney, Julie Graham, Katherine Gibson, Lynn Staeheli, Thomas Bassett, Donald Mitchell, and Laurence Smith. Information about conference grants and residency fellowships may be found at www.rockefellerfoundation.org/bellagio-center.

Alec Murphy, Bellagio Center Residency Fellow, Department of Geography, University of Oregon, and past AAG president. Photograph byrednondox

The organizational structure of geography at Davis is, we believe, unique in the nation. The lack of a core geography department creates certain challenges for us, especially faculty hiring and sometimes student funding and lack of visibility. We believe, however, that our structure also has fundamental advantages. Geography is an inherently integrative discipline in which we use spatial analysis to understand a range of biophysical, social, and cultural processes. Being a graduate group allows faculty across campus to work together with strong interests in geography to become part of the program. During the appeal, colleagues from more than a dozen departments across campus expressed support for preserving the GGG. They pointed to the high value of geographic perspectives in helping them understand problems at the core of their own disciplines.

In the context of our increasingly complex and interdependent world, interdisciplinary programs of study and research are ever more important. We know that geography as a discipline is uniquely positioned to play a critical role in such cutting-edge scholarship and education, but our colleagues outside of the discipline do not necessarily know this. If we can learn from our experience at UC Davis, support for geography and its cutting-edge scholarship can be cultivated effectively by building on a core of geographic theory and methods to engage our colleagues across multiple disciplines in addressing complex, real-world problems.

We look forward to many more decades of this kind of geography at UC Davis, and once again thank the geographic community for its support.

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