CHAPTER 19

MERLE C. PRUNTY ON THE ORIGINS AND EARLY
PHILOSOPHIC BASE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Merle C. Prunty

In the fall of 1976 a student at a California university wrote to Dr. Merle C. Prunty asking for information about the Department of Geography at the University of Georgia in connection with a project in a class on the development of geographic thought. The student, Lynda Doody, inquired about the origin of the Department and the philosophic base on which the Department was founded. Below is the reply from Dr. Prunty, reproduced in the Georgia Geography Newsletter, October 1977, pp. 13-16.

Dear Miss Doody:

To my knowledge, Geography was first offered at the University of Georgia in 1933. In 1932 the Governor, Richard B. Russel (later U.S. Senator) instigated a massive overhaul of higher education in Georgia (along with all other parts of state government), which led to the abolition of 15 small institutions, and the coalescence of two or three others into larger schools, with the result that 15 institutions of higher learning emerged from what had been some 34 or 35. At that time, too, the State Board of Regents as a Constitutional body was created to oversee all these institutions, putting them beyond the reach or control of any single Governor or Legislature.

In 1932, a small two-year teacher training institution called the Georgia Normal College was operating on the northwest outskirts of Athens. Governor Russell's reorganization made it a part of the University which had to absorb all of its tenured faculty. Among these was Mr. E. S. Sell, M.Sc. in Agriculture from the Georgia College of Agriculture sometime before World War I. The Agriculture College did not need, or wish (?), to absorb him but, since no Geography was then offered here, he suggested that he start teaching some. University officials agreed, Mr. Sell went to Chicago for a summer session in the classroom of Harlan Barrows, and returned in the 1933 fall to begin as Professor of Geography here. He remained the sole teacher of Geography until my arrival in March 1946. Mr. Sell taught three courses quarterly and, overall, five or six different courses annually. Obviously no major was possible; these were service and elective courses. Sell was a popular teacher because he was likeable. Also he was an easy grader and Geography had a poor reputation with the administration and much of the faculty.

The beginning of the department as a department stems from my appointment. The World War II experience had convinced the administration of the worth of Geography and they decided to develop a department and support its growth. Thus I was recruited into a constructive, supportive atmosphere, and told to recruit younger people about whom we could build toward the future. The first appointments were in 1947 and 1948. By 1949 we had a staff of six and Mr. Sell had retired. The staff did not exceed a dozen until the early 1960s when we moved into the present building—specifically designed and built for us—and we at last had sufficient space to handle commitments at the graduate level.

At the outset our perception of the department embodied four main ideas: (1) our first "reason for being" was to supply superior instruction in general education and service courses that satisfied the curricula of the several colleges on the campus; (2) we viewed Geography as both a physical and a social science and worked hard (and successfully) to establish it as such; (3) we held to the position that the superior scholar will both teach and research creatively—that is, the teacher is better because of the feedback from an active research program and vice versa. When we found that a personnel selection did not actively adhere to this perception, we eased him out as soon as we could; and (4) we would not undertake a large commitment to graduate instruction until the staff had matured research-wise, and had sufficient numbers for some diversity in offerings. We got to that threshold in 1959-1960 (plus the new building) and since then have been strongly committed to graduate instruction.

From the time that the undergrad major program started on to the present, including the graduate program, there have been about three overriding views within which we have worked that I suppose you could call our "philosophy." The first is that the geographer cannot be a "one-dimension" person, i.e., trained in only one branch of the discipline. He must have sufficient breadth to be able to comprehend the range of problems that characteristically occur in areas. If he has competence, say, in geomorphology but is an ignoramus in economic and biogeography, the odds are good that he will see only the problems in terrain evolution and ultimately will be more of a systematic scientist. This view led to curricula, at all levels, in which the major area of interest was counterbalanced by two other areas plus competence in techniques. The areas were physical, economic and cultural, and regional (plus the technique requirements).

The second position dealt with the relationship between training in systematic and regional fields. Our position always has been that the systematic courses are fundamental and that regional study—when properly done—can only proceed from a strong base in systematic geography. (Good regional work may be the most difficult there is in geography.) Pursuant to this position we do

Dr. Prunty, writing in 1976, was then Alumni Foundation Professor of Geography at the University of Georgia.
not allow undergrads into our regional courses until they are seniors and have a considerable systematic background; we offer considerably more work in systematic than regional, and we do not offer any regional course or program unless we have staff with first-hand field-and-research experience in the area involved.

The third position involves the technique area. From the outset we developed courses in field methods, cartography, air photo analysis (expanded substantially since 1967 to include the whole remote sensing area), and we stressed documentary analysis. We added quantitative analysis in the early 1950s and I believe we were the first department in the country to offer course work in it at the graduate level. Our position is that the geographer should understand and be able to employ not just one of these analytical techniques but whichever ones are more germane to the problem he is treating. Although one of the earliest departments committed to quantitative training, we emphatically do not wish to see our people competent in that technique area alone, or any other single one. People trained in that manner of necessity “twist,” or “warp,” the problem they confront to fit the one set of procedures that they know—which is damn poor science—or they can’t attack the problem at all and may not even realize that. The nature of the problem should determine the techniques employed in its solution and not vice versa. Therefore we expect some breadth in command of techniques, particularly at the graduate level.

The main changes over the years have been programmatic. For example, we have substantially expanded work in air photo-remote sensing, and are adding work in biogeography and medical geography presently. We also decreased the rigidity of our M.A. program recently. This M.A. was probably the toughest in the country and had been referred to as a “little Ph.D.” Initially designed squarely as a base for a Ph.D., we increased its flexibility enough to allow a considerable concentration in any two areas so as to make it more effective as a terminal degree. (We are making an effort to produce more terminal M.A.’s who are prepared for business, planning and governmental careers.)

I hope this supplies what you needed. Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Marcia C. Prunty
Alumni Foundation Professor

CHAPTER 20
A SHORT HISTORY OF FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

Morton D. Winsberg

INTRODUCTION. The institution, known today as Florida State University, was founded in 1851 when the State Legislature proposed the establishment of a "Seminary" west of the Suwannee River. In 1854 the residents and money to build what came to be called Seminole City, the present location. The first class consisted of both men and women, but instruction was divided into "departments." Following the Civil War, the institution became a college for elementary and secondary schools. The small higher education system. It was during the "Seminole West" period that geography can be found. There are many gaps in the records, but in the earliest available, that of 1887-1891, taught in the high school. Two courses were offered: Physical Geography. In 1901, the State Legislature authorized the name change to Florida State College for women. In 1904 the State Legislature authorized it to be coeducational. In 1905, the State Legislature reorganized the State College for women into the then University of the State of Florida. By 1909 pressure to change the name of the institution from Florida Female College to State University of Florida, and the then University of the State of Florida in Gainesville. Florida was the last Southern state to have a college specifically for women, and elegantly named the Florida Female College. It continued liberal studies its primary focus, with teacher training a dominant component. The geography department had a strong tradition, with faculty trained in the field. By 1900, the School of History was known simply as the School of History. In 1909, the University of Florida was renamed the University of Florida.

Dr. Winsberg is Professor Emeritus of Geography at Florida State University.