The Evolution of Geography at Slippery Rock University

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Geography is entering its 115th year at Slippery Rock University. SRU is located in Slippery Rock, a town of three thousand people in western Pennsylvania approximately fifty miles north of Pittsburgh. The university now has about 7,500 students. This report will review key developments in geography at Slippery Rock University over the past century. During the middle to late 1800's, Pennsylvania organized fourteen normal schools, with Slippery Rock's dating from February 1, 1889. It is the second youngest of Pennsylvania's fourteen normal schools.

Slippery Rock State Normal School and its sister institutions were designed exclusively for the training of teachers in either two or four year programs. Given the poor quality of transportation at the time and the hilly terrain, students came from nearby communities and rural areas.

Slippery Rock's first catalog was issued in the spring of 1889. It lists six faculty members for the entire institution. One of these, Maude Bingham, was assigned to teach geography, geometry, and drawing. Only three geography courses were offered at the institution: "Geography of the U.S. and Europe," "Political Geography," and "Physical Geography." All students at the normal school had to take at least one of these courses, no matter which teacher preparation program they had chosen. Harper's Geography and Houston's Physical Geography were listed as the required texts in the first catalog.

Maude Bingham's credentials appear in the 1892-1893 catalog. She held an M.E. degree, but the granting institution is not provided. She was assigned to teach geography, history, and civil government. Slippery Rock's faculty had increased to thirteen.

Geography was included in the 1908-1909 catalog, but no faculty member was identified. Geography was listed under "Historical Science," which included the following courses: "U.S. History," "Civil Government of the U.S. and Pennsylvania," and "Political Geography." These were recommended as junior year courses for the Bpd (Bachelor of Pedagogics) Degree. Page 58 of the 1908-1909 catalog offers a description of Political Geography as follows:

The subject of Political Geography is carefully taught as presented in modern textbooks with abundant help in the form of maps, globes and illustrations. Facts and causal relationships discovered in the study of home surroundings prepare for the study of distant and unseen natural features, resources, industries, commerce, modes of communication and unfamiliar peoples. Students who expect to enter the Junior class are
urged to prepare themselves thoroughly upon this branch before entrance upon normal work.

The description of Physical Geography as presented in the same source follows: A thorough course in Physical Geography is given. Geological agencies now operative are first studied; the forces producing changes and the laws of their operation are considered; also the structure and development of the earth and its adaptation to the support of life are traced. The development of the nation is considered with reference to its dependence upon climate and general geographic conditions. Modeling in chalk, sand and paper pulp is taught.

The deterministic character of this description is in keeping with the environmental determinism prevalent in the discipline at the time.

Geography is listed with the sciences in the 1921 catalog. Two geography faculty members are identified. John F. Allison held B.S. and A.M. degrees from unidentified institutions, and was responsible for teaching both geography and mathematics. The other faculty member, Alma Rice, was shared between geography and pedagogics. The catalog listed eleven courses which, given the staffing, were most likely not offered frequently. "Principles of Geography," "Economic Geography," and "Teaching of Geography" were the main electives listed in the 1921 catalog.

On August 13, 1927, the name of the institution was changed to Slippery Rock State Teachers College, reflecting an intensification of its focus on teacher preparation.

The Geography Department came into existence with the hiring of its first chairperson, Dr. Warren Thoburn Strain, for the 1936-1937 academic year. Dr. Strain received his B.S. degree from Indiana State University [Indiana], and A.M. and Ph.D. degrees from Wisconsin. While Gamma Theta Upsilon had been chartered in 1932, it came into its own under Dr. Strain. Slippery Rock's Zeta Chapter of the Gamma Theta Upsilon honorary is among the oldest in the country. Twelve courses totaling 36 credit hours were listed in the 1936-1937 catalog. Faculty members at the time were responsible for 15 credit hours per semester. However, Dr. Strain and Ms. Alma Rice were the only faculty members listed in the institution's catalog until the following year, when Elizabeth Stadtlander was hired. Geography course work consisted of eight regional and four systematic courses in 1936-1937.

By the 1941-1942 academic year, Herbert Rasche was hired as Assistant Dean of Men and a geography instructor. He received both his B.A. and M.A. from Wisconsin. Sixteen courses for 39 credit hours were listed in the 1941-1942 catalog. Alma Rice was no longer on the faculty, and Elizabeth Stadtlander had been assigned to Education and no longer taught Geography.

During the 1944-1945 academic year Dr. Strain was the entire department. That may well have also been true during one or two additional years of World War Two.
Course offerings from the 1930's into the 1960's were balanced between regional and systematic courses. Courses dealing with all major world regions are listed in catalogs, as well as systematic courses covering “Physical Geography,” “Economic Geography,” and “Cultural Geography.” Dr. Strain, who had shaped the department, passed away in 1961 at the age of 59. Roy T. Hickman, who held a B.S. and an M.A. from Ohio State, was hired in 1958. He would ultimately serve as Chair during the period of Dr. Strain’s failing health.

On June 8, 1960 the institution became Slippery Rock State College. Then, by 1963, there were three faculty members including Dr. John Ball, acting chair; Roy T. Hickman, and George West. The faculty increased to five by 1965, and to seven by 1970.

In the 1972-73 academic year there were nine geography faculty. One of the recent hires was Paul Rizza. He held a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia, and would chair the department for most of the next 25 years. The major required 21 hours, selected from regional and systematic course offerings. In addition, a course in elementary statistics was required. “Environmental Problems” and “Conservation” were offered for the first time.

Ten geography faculty are listed in the 1974-1976 catalog. Geography majors had a choice of three concentrations: Rural and Urban Planning, Human Ecology, and Liberal Arts Geography. In addition, a program for secondary education majors was available. Nine regional courses and twenty topical and systematic courses were offered. In 1977, the credit hours required for each concentration were: Liberal Arts Geography, 30 semester hours; Human Ecology, 39 semester hours, and Rural and Urban Planning, 30 semester hours.

In 1983, the State System of Higher Education was created. There were fourteen member institutions. As part of the SSHE system, Slippery Rock State College’s name changed to Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania.

By 1993, SRU was offering a B.A. in Geography in two concentrations: Environmental Planning and Liberal Arts Geography. It was also offering a B.S. in geography with the choice of two concentrations: Applied Geography and Environmental Planning.

Paul Rizza retired in 1998. Not long after his retirement his mother-in-law, Mrs. Ethel Carruth, donated 2.5 million dollars to SRU. This money was used to renovate West Hall, which was built in 1900. This beautifully restored building is now called Paul and Carolyn Carruth Rizza Hall. It is the second building on campus to be named after a geographer. Some years earlier, the Behavioral Science Building was named the Strain Behavioral Science Building in honor of Warren T. Strain, the geography department's first chairperson.
The Geography Department was merged with Geology in July, 2001, becoming the Department of Geography, Geology, and the Environment. The combined department presently has eight geographers, five geologists, and a soil chemist. James Hathaway, with a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, chairs the department. A B.A. degree is available in the Liberal Arts/Geography requiring 37 semester hours, while a B.S. degree is available in Applied Geographic Technology that requires 55 semester hours. The department is also responsible for the B.S. in Environmental Studies program, which has a 55-semester hour requirement. Twenty-one credit minors are available in both Geography and Geographic Information Technology.

The department has endeavored to advance the perspectives and insights of geography, and in more recent years, environmental studies, via high quality curricular programs for majors and high quality general education courses for non-majors. At least eight SRU students have gone on to obtain doctorates in geography. These include James McConnell at SUNY Buffalo, Susan Hardwick at the University of Oregon, Lizbeth Pyle at West Virginia University, and Carolyn Prorok, who is a member of the SRU department.

Given SRU’s Normal school origins and the faculty’s four-course teaching load each semester; it is not surprising that the department’s mission focuses on teaching. But faculty also try to extend knowledge in our discipline through research and to provide service to the university and our region. Our departmental website (www.sru.edu, then follow the links to geography) shows some of the contributions we have made in these areas.

Geography has a long and productive tradition at SRU. At present we face challenges common to most of higher education and to other geography programs, but we will do our best to build on what our forebears have provided for us.
AT 1889
When Slippery Rock University, in the town of Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, opens as Slippery Rock Normal School in 1889, all students are required to take at least one of the three geography courses offered by Maude Bingham – Geography of the U.S. and Europe, Physical Geography, and Political Geography. The name of the institution changes over the years, first to Slippery Rock State Teachers College in 1927, then to Slippery Rock State College in 1960, and finally to Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania in 1983, but geography's presence in the curriculum remains constant throughout.

Warren Thoburn Strain, with a Ph.D. degree from the University of Wisconsin, joins the faculty for the 1936-37 academic year to chair the newly created Department of Geography. The geography curriculum includes twelve courses, eight regional and four systematic ones, which are offered on a multi-year schedule. Professor Strain, who chairs the geography department through the 1950s, is honored by the university in its naming of the Strain Behavioral Science Building.

By the mid-1970s, Slippery Rock State College's geography faculty of nine offer both an independent geography major with concentrations in rural and urban planning, human ecology, and liberal arts geography, and a program for education majors. Paul Rizza joins the geography faculty in the early 1970s and chairs the department for most of the next 25 years. Following his retirement in 1998, he becomes the second geographer to be honored by the university when West Hall, built in 1900, is renovated and renamed the Paul and Carolyn Carruth Rizza Hall for Paul and his mother-in-law.

During the 1990s the department's program evolves to offer a B.A. in geography with concentrations in environmental planning and liberal arts geography, and a B.S. with concentrations in applied geography and environmental planning. An administrative reorganization in 2001 results in the current Department of Geography, Geology, and the Environment, with programs leading to the B.S. degree in Applied Geographic Technology and Environmental Studies and to the B.A. degree in Liberal Arts/Geography. [www.sru.edu]

If you have information on the Rand McNally Geography text, I would like to cite both it and the Houston works -