USC Geography Department History

The origins of the department date back to 1932/33 when Malcolm Havens Bissell (Ph. D. Yale, 1921), who had been hired by the USC Geology Department in 1929, offered a course on human geography. By 1935/36, seven geography courses were being offered and the name of the department was changed to Geography and Geology. A year later a separate Geography Department was established with a major, a minor, and seventeen courses on the books, and Bissell was promoted to Professor of Geography. By 1938/39 the department had been moved from the Division of Physical Sciences to the Division of Social Sciences.

Geography continued as a small undergraduate department through 40s, 50s, and 60s. Bissell had resigned in 1945 and in 1949 John W. Reith (Ph. D. Clark, 1949) was appointed Assistant Professor and Chair. David W. Landis (Ph. D. Ohio State, 1950) was on the faculty in the early 50s until he became founding member of the Department of Geography and Planning at Chico State University in 1957. Landis had co-founded the Los Angeles Geographic Society in 1954.

In 1965, Roderick C. McKenzie (Ph. D. UCLA, 1972) was hired as an Instructor, and then became Chair of the department in 1968 upon the death of John Reith. Among the other full time faculty in the late 1960s and the 1970s were John Mc Donald (M. A. UCLA), Don Joseph (Ph. D. UCLA, 1972), Jerry Tyner (Ph. D. UCLA), Paul Zierer (M. A. UCLA), and Ronald F. Lockman. Numerous part-time faculty served the department in the 1970s and early 1980s, including J. Robert Stinson, Robert Johnson, Dominic Miretti, Christopher Salter, Eliezer Shammou, Clem Paddick, Harry Coffin, John Rees, Dave Hudson, Geraldine Knatz, David Robinson, David Tool, R. David Weber, Richard A. Crooker, and Amalie J. Brown.

Weaver Arrives

In 1978, John C. Weaver, the former President of the University of Wisconsin system, arrived at USC as the Executive Director of the Center for the Study of the American Experience in. He was also appointed Distinguished Professor of Geography and would succeed Rod McKenzie as Chair of the department in 1981.

On July 1, 1980, a report on the USC Department of Geography was submitted to John Schutz, Dean of the LAS Division of Social Sciences and Communication. The report was prepared by an outside review committee of three geographers who had visited USC in April 1980: Lawrence M. Sommers, Professor of Geography at Michigan State University (Committee Chair), A. David Hill, Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado, and Salvatore J. Natoli, Executive Director of the Association of American Geographers in Washington, D. C.

The charge of the committee was to provide suggestions for the direction of the USC Geography Department that through most of its long history had been very small, at least in terms of full-time faculty, and in recent years had employed large numbers of part-time faculty to teach a curriculum
that was dominated by undergraduate service courses. The committee recommended that the department be rejuvenated with a focus on "Urban Environments," and that new faculty should be hired to cover the following specialties: economic, resource/environmental, physical, cultural/social, and political.

As a result of the committee recommendations, Dean Schutz appointed a geography search committee in the Fall of 1980. Committee members included Robert Biller, Dean of the School of Public Administration (Chair); William Baer, Director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning; Jennifer Wolch, Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning; John Weaver; and Robert Stinson of California State University, Dominguez Hills. The committee searched, for two consecutive academic years, for an urban geographer at the associate or full professor level (who after a year or two at USC would likely become department Chair). Although these searches attracted outstanding applicants, some of whom have gone to prominent in the field, no formal interviews were undertaken.

Bohannan Arrives

Further progress had to await the arrival of a new Dean of the Division of Social Sciences. Paul Bohannan, an Anthropologist from University of California, Santa Barbara, became Dean in the Fall of 1982. His keen interest in the field of Geography may be partly related to his experience at Santa Barbara and previously at Northwestern, where he was exposed to excellent geography programs. His enthusiastic voice joined a chorus of support for Geography at USC to counter a small number of dissenting voices. (Among the most ardent supporters, of course, was John Weaver who, in later years, was quoted as saying: "I was not about to preside, as the last act of my academic career, over the demise of a geography department.")

Under Bohannan's direction, the search for new faculty continued. The first appointment was a physical geographer, Assistant Professor Douglas J. Sherman (Ph. D. Toronto, 1982) who arrived in Fall 1983 after holding a Post Doctoral research position at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts in 1982-83. Also in 1983, Thomas J. Jablonsky (Ph. D. USC, 1978) was appointed Assistant Professor and Associate Chair of Geography. Jablonsky was the Director of the USC Program for Environment and the City (PEAC), which administratively came into geography and ultimately, in 1992, was folded into the Geography curriculum.

In the fall of 1983, the department was authorized to search for an assistant professor who would share an appointment with the School of Urban and Regional Planning. Kevin E. McHugh (Ph. D. Illinois, 1984) was hired and stayed for one year, 1984-85, before moving on to Arizona State University.

Shift to Full-time Faculty

Through the 1983-84 Academic Year, the department had depended upon part-time faculty to cover most of its extensive curriculum. Much of the support came from the USC College of Continuing Education (CCE), which catered to part-time and evening students. CCE funneled
tuition money into departments proportional to the number students they taught. In each year from the early 1970s until 1984, the Geography Department hired at least six part-time instructors. Even though Geography did not have a full major program in the 60s, 70s, and early 1980s, and few full-time faculty, it had a strong undergraduate presence on the USC campus through its many service courses.

In an effort to change the dependence of the department on part-time faculty, Bohannan initiated a new policy in a memo of April 26, 1983 to Chair John Weaver: “When you write the letters of appointment for the six part-time faculty in Geography, will you please tell them that 1983-84 is the last year that they will be teaching at U. S. C. The College has a policy of having its courses taught by full-time faculty, and we are in the process of building a permanent Geography faculty.”

Searches

In the Academic Plan for the Division of Social Sciences and Communication, dated September 1984, Bohannan noted that in 1982-83 the Geography Department had been reduced to two (full-time) members with the departure of Ronald Lockman and the retirement of John McDonald, and that a subsequent re-organization had taken place with the addition of Sherman, Jablonsky, and McHugh (joining McKenzie and Weaver). In that document he announced plans to make two more appointments in 1985-86, citing the need for “very little new funding” to develop Geography because of its previous prominence in the College of Continuing Education. Given the anticipated retirement of Weaver in 1985, a search for a new Chair was begun in 1984.

By early 1985 dozens of applications had been received and four candidates were selected for interview. During January and February 1985, Dean Bohannan aggressively pursued the candidacy of a wife/husband team of Patricia Gober and William L. Graf, both Professors of Geography at Arizona State University. The search committee (composed of the Geography faculty plus Jennifer Wolch) and, most especially, the Dean were intrigued with the idea of bringing in two senior persons simultaneously, one a physical geographer and one a human geographer. Negotiations, however, failed to bring Gober and Graf from Tempe.

Subsequently, Curtis C. Roseman (Ph. D. Iowa, 1969), Professor of Geography at the University of Illinois, was offered the job. He arrived in July 1985 as Professor and Chair having received guarantees from Bohannan for new faculty positions and other resources to assist in developing the department and establishing graduate programs. Roseman’s arrival coincided with the retirement of John Weaver, who was appointed Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Geography, and the move of Kevin McHugh to Arizona State. Thus, in the Fall of 1985 the department was back to four faculty members, Jablonsky, McKenzie, Roseman, and Sherman. But not for long.

With the full support of Bohannan, a broad search was launched for three new faculty members. In early 1986, eight candidates were interviewed, and three were hired: Michael J. Dear, Professor (Ph. D. Pennsylvania, 1974) from McMaster University (initially in a joint appointment with the School of Urban and Regional Planning), and Assistant Professors Fred M. Shelley (Ph. D. Iowa, 1981) from the University of Oklahoma, and Bernard O. Bauer who was finishing his degree at
The Johns Hopkins University (Ph. D., 1987).

Program Development

For the following three years, the seven USC Geography Faculty members—Bauer, Dear, Jablonsky, McKenzie, Roseman, Shelley, and Sherman—participated in lengthy discussions pertaining to program revisions and other aspects the future of the department. In 1986, the first annual Fall faculty weekend retreat was held at a motel in Laguna Beach. Here, the first outlines of a new undergraduate curriculum and geography major were produced, and discussions were initiated on new graduate programs. A colloquium series in which visitors and USC people give research presentations, and a newsletter, the USC Geography Update, were also established. The first of several USC Geography conferences was also held in the Fall of 1986: “Los Angeles: Capital of the Twenty-First Century.”

In February 1987, the USC Undergraduate Studies Committee approved a complete overhaul of the undergraduate curriculum. This involved the addition of twelve new courses and revision or deletion of many others. New geography major and minor programs were introduced (added to a Social Sciences Divisional Major which had been in place since the 1970s). The major required completion of four core courses—Geographical Analysis, Geographical Processes, Field Techniques, and Proseminar—and offered students three areas of emphasis: physical, human, and environmental/regional.

With the retirement of Dean Bohannan in 1987 a new Social Sciences Dean, Sylvester Whitaker, became closely involved in the development of USC Geography. The next faculty appointment was that of John Wolcott, a fluvial geomorphologist who had just received his Ph. D. from the University of British Columbia, in the Fall of 1989. Wolcott stayed in Geography until the Spring of 1995 when he decided to leave academics to take a staff position at the USC Health Sciences campus. By the Fall of 1989 the Geography faculty profile of the department was very different than it was in the early part of the decade. Dear and Roseman were full professors, and Jablonsky and Sherman had been promoted to Associate Professor earlier that year. McKenzie and Wolcott were Assistant Professors. Fred Shelley, who had been promoted to Associate Professor in 1988, had decided to leave USC for Florida State University.

Bruce to Kaprielian and Wolch to Geography

In the late 1980s Bruce Hall, the home of the Geography Department since the 1960s, was on the City’s hit list of buildings that were deemed unsafe due to potential earthquake damage. The department also had out-grown its funky digs in the old tenement building. So in 1989 Geography was moved to a brand-spanking new Kaprielian Hall (named for a former Executive Vice President of USC). On October 31 of that year, at 11:59 pm., Bruce Hall, was locked, to be razed during the next two months.

The new facilities in Kaprielian Hall included space for the Geography GIS and Instructional Computer Laboratory (named the “Village Computer Lab” because of its former location in the
University Village). A library/seminar room was also included, providing valuable space for the department’s journal collection. On January 27, 1992 the room became the *John C. Weaver Library and Seminar Room*, in honor of Weaver’s work on behalf of the department in the early 1980s. Weaver subsequently passed away on March 10, 1995.

Then during the 1990-91 academic year, Dean Whitaker was able to wrangle the transfer of Jennifer Wolch from Urban Planning to Geography. Wolch has undergraduate and masters degrees in geography and worked with geographer Julian Wolpert at Princeton for her Ph.D. She had been at USC since 1978, all the time active in the discipline of geography through publications and service. During her first year in the department, 1991-92, Wolch was promoted to Professor, and then she was appointed Chair as of the Fall of 1992. In 1991-93 the department had a total of eight faculty members: Bauer, Dear, Jablonsky, McKenzie, Roseman, Sherman, Wolch, and Wolcott.

**New Graduate Program**

During in the late 1980s, the Geography faculty developed a proposal for the initiation of graduate programs. Drafts were circulated to various faculty members and administrators on campus for comments and suggestions, then the completed proposal was submitted to the Graduate and Professional Schools Committee in early 1990. Final approval came on September 27, 1990 for programs to commence in the Fall of 1991. The programs included an MA degree in human geography, an MS degree in physical geography, and a Ph. D. program with two emphases: human geography and process geomorphology. Arriving in the fall of 1991, the first class of graduate students had seven members, including the first and second USC Geography Ph. Ds., James A. Tyner (1995) and Wei Li (1996), and the first Masters recipient, Gregg Wassmansdorf (1994).

The number of graduate students increased to twenty-two in 1996. Setting the standard for future graduate students, during the first five years of our graduate programs, five students received major fellowships to support their work, four received National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grants, and others garnered various awards and honors. Numerous students presented papers at professional meetings, and four received student paper awards from their Association of American Geography specialty groups. By 1997, the Ph.D. program had completed a full cycle, as the first two Ph. D.s took excellent academic jobs—James A. Tyner at Kent State University, and Wei Li at the University of Connecticut.

**Faculty and Staff in the 1990s**

In 1993, the department was fortunate to appoint Laura Pulido (Ph. D. UCLA, 1992) as Assistant Professor. A human/environmental geographer, Pulido had taught at California State University Fullerton for two years. With the arrival of Pulido in 1993, and under the direction of Chair Wolch, the department became a key participant in the development of an interdisciplinary Environmental Studies program, whose undergraduate major was begun in fall 1993 and a Masters program in 1996.
A year later, in January 1995, Tom Jabolonsky left for Marquette University in Milwaukee to become the director of their Institute for Urban Life. Jablonsky's extensive service experience at USC, in areas such as curriculum and outreach, made him an ideal candidate to develop that Institute. Also in 1995 Sherman was promoted to Professor and immediately appointed as Department Chair, a position held by Wolch since 1992.


The everyday operations of the department have been capably handled by the office staff from the late 1980s to the present. Estella Tilley served from 1986 to 1993; Jennifer Gaston became the second full-time secretary, here from 1986 to 1997; Richard Parks served from 1993 to 1995; Billie Shotlow from 1995 to the present, Darlene Warr from 1997 to 1999; and Onita Edwards from 2003 to 2006.

Space, Place, and GIS

In the 1990s, the department had a piecemeal presence on campus beyond its Kaplanian Hall core. For a few years beginning in 1996, space in the basement of Science Hall was used for geomorphology research. Previously, the old, leaky swimming pool in the Physical Education building had been acquired to provide storage space. And in 1996 the six-foot diameter globe acquired in 1992 by the department from the parent company of World Savings, Inc., was refurbished and mounted in a stairwell in the new Leavey Library, where it remains today.

The major new facility and program for the department was the GIS (Geographic Information Systems) Laboratory, opened in Hancock Hall in Fall 1997. The Lab was established by John P. Wilson (Ph. D. Toronto, 1986), who was appointed to the Geography faculty after having visited the department from Montana State University in 1995-96. Since then the GIS Lab has forged numerous partnerships with units and projects, on campus and in elsewhere, that involve both basic science and GIS applications, and has brought in millions of dollars in grants and contracts.

A new GIS curriculum and a Geographical Information Sciences minor were begun in Fall 1997. A distance-learning Geographic Information Sciences graduate certificate program was initiated in 1998, and since that time scores of certificates have been awarded. The field-oriented capstone course of the program includes a one-week residency at the USC Wrigley Marine Science Center on Santa Catalina Island. In 1999 the Lab became a member UNIGIS International, a worldwide consortium of educational institutions that offer distance-learning courses in GIS. Undergraduate and graduate GIS courses have been integrated into the Geography curriculum and the lab is home to several geography graduate students. In early 2006 the spatial separation between the GIS Lab in Hancock Hall and the Geography Department was eliminated, when the Lab moved to
new and expanded facilities in Kaprielian Hall.

GIS Lab faculty affiliates have included: Chris Williamson (Ph. D. USC, 1986), who teaches distance learning courses, and Jennifer Swift, Research Assistant Professor of Civil Engineering. Full time staff members have included Ed DeJong, who was appointed first Laboratory Manager in 1997 and Maureen Phelan, who started in 2001 and is now GIS Administrative Coordinator.

In the 1990s, USC geography faculty played key roles in other on-campus programs. Michael Dear established the Southern California Studies Center in 1995; Doug Sherman served as half-time director of the USC Sea Grant Program for five years beginning in 1993; and Jennifer Wolch was a co-founder of the interdisciplinary USC Center for Sustainable Cities, which was initiated in 1998 with a $2.7 million grant from the National Science Foundation’s Integrated Graduate Research Education and Training (IGERT) Program.

Faculty Transitions

In the spirit of rotating the responsibility of chairing the department, the following people have served in that position in last decade: Douglas J. Sherman, 1995-98; John P. Wilson, 1998-2001; Bernard O. Bauer, 2001-2003, and Michael Dear, 2004 to the present.

Carolyn Cartier (Ph. D. Berkeley, 1991), an expert on globalism and China, was appointed as Assistant Professor in 1999, joining us from the geography faculty at the University of Oregon. Doug Sherman, who first came to USC in 1983, left us in 2002 to become Head of the Geography Department at Texas A&M University, a large department having over twenty faculty members. Bernie Bauer, who had been at USC since January 1987, moved back to his native Canada in December 2003 to become a university administrator. He is now Dean of the Irving K. Barber School of Arts & Sciences at University of British Columbia, Okanagan.

Social geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Ph. D. Rutgers, 1998) arrived from UC Berkeley in Jan 2004 as Associate Professor with a joint appointment in Geography and the USC Program in American Studies and Ethnicity (PASE). She is now Director of PASE. Curtis C. Roseman, who first arrived at USC in 1985, retired at the end of the 2003/2004 academic year to become Professor Emeritus. Manuel Pastor (Ph. D. Massachusetts, 1984) will be joining the department from UC Santa Cruz in January 2007 as Professor, also with a joint appointment in PACE.

Among the part-time and visiting faculty members over the last ten years have been: Michelle Cochrane 1997-98; Ralph Saunders 1997-99; Mark Lorang 1997-99; and Haim Tsoar 1999. Steven Koletty (Ph. D. USC, 2000) and David Pepper (Ph. D. LSU, 2000) have made substantial contributions to the departmental life as Instructors since 2002 and 2001 respectively. Travis Loncore has been in a research faculty position since 1999 and Stephany Pincetl was Research Associate Professor from 2001 to 2003.

The Department in the New Millennium
In 2003 the USC University Committee on Academic Review reviewed the department very favorably. The external review committee was composed of Risa Palm of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Julian Wolpert from Princeton University.

After many years with only a small undergraduate group, the department now has a lively and growing group of majors. In 2000 the USC College initiated a policy at the graduate level that emphasizes the Ph. D. Masters degree programs were de-emphasized, and phased out in Geography. Since its graduate program inception in 1991, USC Geography awarded fourteen MA and ten MS degrees. The first MA was awarded to Gregg Wassmansdorf in 1994 and the last To Django Sibley in 2002; the first MS to Jereme Venditti in 1997 and the last ones to Christine Lam and to Isaiah Mack in 2003. By early 2006, the department had awarded twenty Ph. D. degrees, with six more scheduled to finished during 2006. In one of the saddest times in departmental history, Ph. D. candidate Jim McDermott passed away 2004. The department honored his memory by awarding him the PhD degree posthumously.

Graduates of the department have gone on to excel in a variety positions. More than a dozen Ph. D. graduates hold academic positions in universities in North America and elsewhere in the world. Others hold important positions in the private and government sectors. Some Bachelors and Masters graduates have gone on to Ph. D. work at other universities; numerous others are employed by a variety of public and private agencies.

As of the Spring of 2006 the Geography faculty consisted of: Professors Dear, Wilson, and Wolch; Associate Professors Cartier, Gilmore, and Pulido; and Assistant Professors McKenzie [and Professor Emeritus Roseman]. This small, highly productive, faculty will expand with the addition of Manual Pastor and the promise of one or more new faculty members with GIS-related expertise. Following a long history as a department that served USC primarily in an undergraduate service role, USC Geography in the last two decades has excelled in research, graduate and undergraduate education, and service. Through the work of its faculty and graduates, the department is now nationally and internationally recognized for the high quality of its work.