Geography at Southern Oregon State College

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The establishment of Southern Oregon Normal School by the Oregon legislature in 1925 restored to Ashland an earlier normal school that had closed in 1909. The school was renamed Southern Oregon College of Education in 1939, Southern Oregon College in 1956, and Southern Oregon State College in 1975. The extended service of several faculty has enabled the geography program to enjoy a continuity reaching back to the beginning of the school.

Walter Redford, the first instructor in geography, was one of the 22 original faculty members who began classes in 1926. Redford was selected as president of the college in 1932, a post he occupied until his retirement in 1946. Roy Wilson McNeal came to Ashland for the second year of the college to teach a variety of subjects, as he had been doing elsewhere for ten years. He used leaves around 1940 and 1950.
to develop his preference for geography through graduate study at the University of California and the National University of Mexico. For 26 years he was the only member of the geography staff. After retiring in 1961, he continued to teach part-time until 1972.

The 1950s and 1960s

New geography appointments between 1958 and 1967 created a staff of diverse professional interests. First was William McKinney, who had served for three years as a community survey consultant for the Georgia Department of Public Health after writing a dissertation on “Geographic Aspects of Hospital Planning.” His research interests and publications in regional and national journals focused on geography as a social science and upon techniques, especially earth-sun relationships and mathematical geography.

Forrest Lesher came to the geography program in 1961. He was associated with the Big Ten field camp for several years. This teaching responsibilities at SOC focused primarily on economic geography and geology. He left the college in 1977. Dean Phelps came in 1963 with primary responsibility for cultural geography courses. He joined Frank McGraw as author of The Rise of the City, and served on the Ashland City Council for four years. Ernest DeRocher had a joint appointment in geography and education. His responsibilities included teaching and supervising of student teachers.

Several appointees, beginning in 1964, had interests that related conveniently to natural resources of southern Oregon. The first of these was Claude Curran, whose primary interests were in geographic techniques and physical geography. His dissertation, “The Mendocino Chaparral, a Problem in Resource Management,” dealt with the role of wildfire along the east front of northern California’s Coast Range. This led to research on natural hazards, especially wildfire in urbanizing areas, funded by the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Rogue Valley Fire Prevention Cooperative. On the campus he was director of the Southern Oregon Regional Services Institute for three and a half years, starting at its inception, and has twice served in the high profile position of chair of the faculty senate. Recently he was appointed to the Oregon State Water Resources Board by Governor Goldschmidt.

Frank MacGraw joined the department in 1966. He authored and co-authored several books for secondary schools including Geography of the United States (programmed text in three volumes) and Man’s Physical World. He was a consultant to the High School Geography Project for the Association of American Geographers. In Oregon and local affairs, he was appointed by Governor McCall to the State Water Resources Board in 1973, and was Oregon’s representative to the Pacific Northwest River Basin Commission from 1973 to 1975. In 1980 Governor Atiyeh appointed him to the Natural Heritage Advisory Council for Oregon. He also served in an advisory capacity on the Southwest Oregon Forest Practices Commission and on the Forest Intensive Research (FIR) project, as well as on the Medford District BLM Advisory Board.

Richard Hammer joined the faculty a year later, to teach physical geography, remote sensing, and field methods. Much of his work stemmed from his previous assignment at the University of Khartoum from 1963 until 1967. Contracts with the U.S. Army Research Office and the USGS led to “Evaluation of Apollo 9 Photographs of the Sudan” in 1969-70 and “Rainfall Evaluation from Satellite Photographs of the Sudan, 1969-72” in 1973.

The 1970s and 1980s

For the next eleven years the department received no new faculty despite the final retirement of Roy McNeal, the loss of a position during the recession of 1973, and a resignation in 1977. In 1978 the department staff reached four again with the appointment of John Mairs. He had written a dissertation, “Plant Communities of the Steens Mountain Subalpine Grassland and Their Relationship to Certain Environmental Elements” and has published articles on vegetation analysis utilizing remotely sensed information. He has coauthored a physical geography textbook and instructor’s manual.
and served on the faculty senate and several key college committees, and serves as consultant for an archaeological firm.

Through the 1980s meteorologist Leon Hunsaker held a part-time appointment to teach weather and climate. He was chief meteorologist for Pacific Gas and Electric in San Francisco from 1958 to 1968. He was meteorologist for CBS-TV in San Francisco and has served the three major networks in Medford since 1976. He prepared, for a wide audience, television specials that include “Head for the High Ground” (1965), “Games the Jet Stream Plays” (1981), and “Is Our Climate Changing?” (1982).

Susan Reynolds was the first woman geographer to receive a permanent appointment at Southern Oregon. Her doctoral dissertation was “Shelterbelts in the Red River Valley of the North: Patterns in the Landscape.” She teaches upper division classes in cultural and historical geography, urban geography, tourism, Europe, and Australia-New Zealand. She has served on the Ashland Historic Commission since 1988.

John Richards came to the campus in 1988. His doctoral dissertation was “Changing Patterns in Taiwan’s Aquaculture.” In addition to teaching economic geography and world regions, he is active in international programs and the honors program. He has served as an economic consultant to the City of Ashland and a Canadian firm doing business in the Soviet Far East.

Geography Curriculum and Goals

Southern Oregon State College is in a region economically dependent on the natural environment—for timber production, agriculture, tourism, and recreation. It provides a unique and unparalleled setting for studying natural processes, the use and potential abuse of resources, and the concomitant rural-urban transformations taking place in the interior valleys of southwestern Oregon. At the same time the many federal, state, and local agencies managing these resources as well as businesses concerned about long-term economic stability in the region offer employment opportunities. Proper treatment of these interrelated resources, which are both terrestrial and spatial, demands geographic skills and points of view.

Early geography curricula at the college were designed to serve the needs of students who were becoming teachers at the elementary or secondary school level. The primary purpose of geography was to develop an appreciation for description of geographic phenomena. The first geography courses taught were principles of geography, climates of the world, economic geography, South America, North America, and Europe. This emphasis persisted from 1926 until the early 1960s. By the mid 1960s there was greater emphasis upon geography as a profession with opportunities in planning, economic geography, and resource management.

Geography achieved departmental status in 1969 when the program was approved by the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. The degree requirements were fifty hours of geography and twelve hours of introductory geology. Required courses emphasized techniques and topical geography. Only one regional course was required in the major, although others could be elected.

Two long-term goals of the department are to provide courses that support the general education of students and to support teacher preparation. The department also offers a program that thoroughly grounds majors in method and theory and enables them to apply their knowledge beyond the academic world. Our geography majors must combine courses in four interrelated fields commonly recognized in the discipline: cultural, physical, regional, and methodology and techniques (including map reading, cartography, aerial image interpretation, field work, and computer-assisted analysis).

Supporting goals were formulated as a result of the department’s participation in the college’s strategic planning efforts. Others were developed after the department’s self-initiated 1983 program review by an evaluation team from the Association of American Geographers. We have attempted to acquire equipment and materials in support of the instructional program. We have been urged to consolidate the curriculum into a tighter core of essential courses reflecting general
education needs, professional trends in the field, student demand, faculty expertise, and interdepartmental considerations. Our major program was revised to meet present and future needs of graduates. Almost every year the department has been able to offer at least one course taught by a visiting expert in his or her particular field. These have included courses in soils, ecosystems, computer-assisted mapping and geographic information systems, urban geography, forestry management, and weather and climate. Students have responded favorably to these special courses, and all recognize their value in both deepening and broadening the students’ educational experience.

The goals which guide the undergraduate major program in geography at present are variations on the themes stated above. First, to prepare students in geographic methodology by teaching them to observe and to develop hypotheses in a spatial context and to explain physical and cultural landscapes at local, regional, and global scales. Second, to enable students to explain geographic distributions, interactions, and the nature of place. Third, to develop fundamental skills in map reading, cartography, aerial image interpretation, and field research. Fourth, to improve the student’s ability to synthesize, in context, data from diverse sources to understand better the physical and cultural environments in which a people live. Fifth, to prepare students in the application of geographic knowledge through real-world experiences with public resource agencies and private enterprise. Sixth, to apply geographic knowledge in evaluation of environmental and social issues in our increasingly interrelated world.

Distinctive features of the degree program for achieving these ends are a required internship in the senior year and a course in field techniques. These two courses were designed in 1969 to be capstone experiences (the rest of the college required a capstone experience in 1990). Students are placed in internships with one of a variety of public agencies (local, regional, or national) or in the private sector. In addition to the opportunity to learn, these internships have contributed greatly to the organizations where the interns were placed. For example, one group of three interns authored an off-road vehicle plan for the Rogue River National Forest that eventually was adopted as a model for all national forests.

Field geography focuses the student on a small intensively investigated area with a variety of field techniques and experiences culminating in a map portfolio. In many instances the portfolio has been a key factor in swing a job interview in favor of the graduate. There also is a three-day “mini-fieldcamp” in which students design an investigation to interpret some aspect of the camp area (Butte Valley in northeastern California). All of the faculty participate in the course, attending field trips and presentations by students.

Geography Majors and Graduates

The number of majors declined from 38 in 1982 to 14 in 1984, and has slowly climbed back to nearly thirty in winter term 1991. The primary reason for loss of majors in the early 1980s was the potential elimination of the geography degree program during spring 1982. At that time at least eight of the department’s majors transferred to sister institutions in Oregon. There is no way of knowing how many others left for other states or changed their majors to nontargeted disciplines. The drop in employment of the early 1980s also contributed to the decline in student interest.

In spite of this decline in quantity and quality of students in the recent past, the faculty and a majority of students with a degree in geography have reason to be justifiably proud of the program over the years. In the local political arena, graduates have served on the Ashland and Central Point city councils and the Jackson County Commission. The field of planning has found graduates employed by the cities of Ashland, Medford, Grants Pass, and Gold Beach, the counties of Curry and Josephine, and three different Native American tribes in Oregon, as well as at least one city in California. Cartography and remote sensing account for positions with the Defense Mapping Agency, the State of Washington Conservation Department, and a national engineering firm. Many jobs focus on conservation, including those with several federal agencies, Oregon conservation organiza-
tions, and overseas organizations dealing with Peruvian National Parks and the shoreline of the island of Truk. In business some graduates work on locating grocery stores or forecasting and broadcasting weather. Others work in real estate appraisal and brokerage. Consultants deal with environmental analyses, land-use planning, and coal mine reclamation. Graduates also have earned advanced degrees in geography, law, and public administration, and a number are teaching at secondary and university levels.

Teaching Resources

Over the past ten years the department has directed groups of students working for cities and other agencies within the region. These projects for credit have included: mapping and gathering data for the cities of Bandon and North Bend; a flood plain study in Curry County; new environmental data on the bluffs at Bandon and on Pony Slough in North Bend, Oregon; a land-use survey on the Burns Paiute Indian Reservation; ground verification for a Crook County remote sensing project; a riverfront land-use survey for Grants Pass; a recreational use survey of Applegate Lake; and a labor analysis for the city of Ashland. The department is particularly proud of the exceptional dedication and fine work by geography student groups.

Over the past decade the department added to its equipment a blueprint machine handed down from the college physical plant through the geology department, and a Zenith ZW-151-52 microcomputer system purchased almost entirely with private funds. These pieces of equipment provide needed support in the remote sensing and cartography courses. Special geography courses are being offered by Ashland city planners in computer mapping and geographic information systems. The department expects its microcomputer system to be expanded to include a digitizer tablet and plotter and to be used in more classes in the near future.

The department evaluates the effectiveness of individual teaching in several ways. In addition to conventional student evaluation of teaching, there are reviews by colleagues and small group instructional diagnosis conducted by a colleague from outside the School of

Social Science. Course syllabi are exchanged among department faculty, and open and candid discussion between instructors about their teaching effectiveness is an informal method by which teaching is improved in the department.

The Next Decade and the 21st Century

In 1983 the department was evaluated by a visiting team selected by the Association of American Geographers, which consisted of Professors George Macinko from Central Washington State University and Everett Smith from the University of Oregon. The team’s recommendations have been implemented over the last seven years to the extent made possible by college and departmental resources. The report has proved to be a very effective means of articulating departmental strengths and needs. The department will seek funding for another evaluation to be scheduled early in 1992.

Two faculty members will retire near the turn of the century. Otherwise the future of the department appears to be as stable as the vagaries of funding public higher education will permit. The department will continue to push for more laboratory space and for microcomputer equipment and software.

The curriculum as presently configured is reflective of faculty preparation and interests and will not undergo any fundamental changes. Graduates of the program will continue to matriculate into high-ranked graduate schools, serve in a variety of public planning positions, and fill a need for resource managers focusing on public lands, as well as obtain other employment based on skills acquired as undergraduate geography majors.

Sources for this article include faculty personnel records in archives at the State Board of Higher Education (Eugene, Oregon) and Southern Oregon State College. Especially important were the Southern Oregon State College Catalogs of Courses, Southern Oregon State College, Ashland, Oregon, for various years between 1926 and 1991. Also valuable were two review documents: George Macinko and Everett Smith, "Report on the Geography Department at SOSC," Association of American

Southern Oregon State College: Geography Staff since 1926

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Appointment Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walter Redford</td>
<td>Washington, Ph.D., 1932</td>
<td>1926-48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy W. McNeal</td>
<td>California (B), M.A., 1950</td>
<td>1927-71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forrest Lesher</td>
<td>Illinois St. Normal, 1952</td>
<td>1961-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean L. Phelps</td>
<td>Oregon, Ph.D., 1983</td>
<td>1963-87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ernest J. DeRocher</td>
<td>Idaho, M.A.</td>
<td>1964-65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claude W. Curran</td>
<td>Oklahoma, Ph.D., 1973</td>
<td>1964-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard H. Hammer</td>
<td>California (LA), Ph.D., 1967</td>
<td>1967-73</td>
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<tr>
<td>John W. Mairs</td>
<td>Oregon State, Ph.D., 1977</td>
<td>1978-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leon Hunsaker</td>
<td>Massachusetts (MIT), M.A., 1953</td>
<td>1981-91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan Pommering Reynolds</td>
<td>Oregon, Ph.D., 1983</td>
<td>1985-</td>
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<tr>
<td>John B. Richards</td>
<td>Washington, Ph.D., 1986</td>
<td>1988-</td>
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