GEOGRAPHY DEVELOPMENT AT VPI AND SU, FIRST YEARS

PROLOGUE

In the fall of 1967, I joined NCGE and AAG. This was after a summer of two sessions at Athens, Georgia in NDEA Institute for teachers directed by John Ball and in anticipation of attending a two-year, MS program at KU. These programs were structured for master-teachers with little geography background by geography departments. I was delighted to have been selected, as my first full-time classroom teaching had started in the fall of 1952. After receiving our MS in geographic education, Lloyd Hudman and I stayed another year at KU and completed our Ph.D. with Duane Knos, Bob Aagenbrug and Bob Nunley as advisors. In the fall of 1968, Duane encouraged me to attend the NCGE meeting in Chicago; and it was John Ball who introduced me to Rose Sabaroff, a former Harvard Professor, then at VPI and SU. She followed my career and in the summer of 1970, wrote and invited me to join the faculty in the Department of Education, then in the College of Arts and Sciences, to teach geography to teachers. So with KU’s geographers,’ encouragement, I accepted.

Dr. Sabaroff and her husband, formerly of MIT and recruited by VPI for a newly developing program of Architecture and Urban Studies, also in Arts and Sciences, that department, too, would emerged into a separate College. Both strongly supported geography and encouraged my aspirations for its development on campus. They were instrumental in initiating a petition in 1969-70 for the establishment of a Geography program as an immediate priority for Arts and Sciences.

Course descriptions I developed were mailed to VPI and SU over the summer of 1970. So were detailed syllabus, text recommendations and other items required by the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Education. So I finished my dissertation and prepared for its defense. And then headed for Blacksburg.

1970- 1971 GEOGRAPHY

Joining the reception for new faculty, the receiving line included department heads, deans, Vice President and President. When I got to VP Malpus, he asked what my goals were for the year. I replied that I hoped to present geography to teachers in such a way that they would come to know and value the discipline; and that I hoped to initiate the development of a geography program that be valuable to all VPI students, ultimately leading to departmental status for geography. Dr. Malpus, turned to President T. Marshall Hahn, asking me to repeat myself. They were both interested in my ambition, querying just how long did I think this would take. When I replied that it would probably take me three years, they laughed out loud. Malpus told me to think more like ten! Hahn said to keep him apprised of any progress. That I did, and this proved to be a saving grace for geography at difficult times with deans over budgets and faculty lines.
The cover on my manuscript is: PROPOSAL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE IN GEOGRAPHY IN THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES AT VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY. Under this title it is typed: "Presented by the Geography Program to the Department of Political Science," then a first step through Curriculum committees on campus. Inside the cover, the first pages are a synopsis of developments and those I have copied and attached the forward. But, I believe PROPOSAL is an edited version of a handout that accompanied my presentation as one of the speakers at an NSF funded AAG meetings on undergraduate programs, so it is not the original. It does include my 1970-1 work to develop the full panorama of course syllabi for an undergraduate major. What I believe may be my presentation is identified in the Attachments.

Now the proposed classes and structure were based on my graduate work at KU, the weekly meetings Duane Knos had with his teaching assistants, and my course in Models in Geography under Dave Simonette. It too was also a crucial component when it came to contacting geographers to help me with detailed course descriptions. To tailor the conceptual framework to fit VPI, I made appointments and carried out extensive interviews — some notes are here — from across campus. My next step was to take my material, an outline and a synopsis out for review. I traveled, spending time at Penn State with leaders in our profession like Pierce Lewis for the cultural section, at Clarke U with Duane Knos for pedagogy and over all structure, and Saul Cohn, exploring with him his thoughts on strategies to finesse getting geography inserted where none formally existed. Then, too, at NCGE — I soon served on its Board — and there and at AAG meetings, I also met with ASU's John Lounsbury about the physical geography; and, from KU, with George Jenks and others, as well as those from AAG Office and its Officers. We also discussed potential hires, the merits of a seasoned geographer verses a new Ph.D., materials and space.

There are letters here from Larry Sommers and Sam Natoli. They came to campus funded by AAG's Consulting Program in January 1971. Prior to their coming, I sent them my early work on strategies and the curricula based on what fall interviews on campus uncovered. Early in the fall of 1970 I had proposed a university wide committee of powerful men, decision makers highly regarded by my two deans and VPI's President and VP. In late 1970, when I could show my two deans the interview material concerning the support geography had, they initiated the committee with appropriate invitations to serve. The committee men made me chair. This meant strategic guidance and entrée for us — the consultants and me — in shaping our campus itinerary. This committee worked hard, getting their respective departments and colleges - the campus - receptive, for what was to be a very productive time for Sommers and Natoli onsite. Later, they sent back a digest, a most useful "Consultants Report" incorporating my material which they had prior to the visit, what they collected while on campus, and in interviews with campus decision makers, all doctored with their considerable wisdom.
During this period, I contacted the cultural geographers at the University of Virginia. They agreed to support a geography departmental proposal when it got to the State level, if the program stayed away from their turf, and VPI's program would compliment, not compete, with theirs for state support. At VPI, the nationally acclaimed geology program agreed not to block geography’s development, as long as we worked with them in the physical geography area, and did not duplicate. The campus geography’s committee had the clout to back me up, that geology could review and offer input, but not have veto, our physical geography offerings.

In the fall of 1970, I was housed in the Dept of Education, and in '71, in their new building. But later, I had two offices, an additional one in the Department of Political Science, where I had an additional grad assistant. There I worked on plans for space, lab and other furniture for a fledging program in a new building planned for Arts and Sciences. It was the Chair’s wisdom that alerted me to the budget cycle, and worked with me on geography’s first budget for staff, space, and other needs for my proposed geography program. With his intervention and help this was inserted in a timely manner into that of the overall campus funding cycle. Not only that, he advised me to send it two ways, through the Department of Political Science/College of Arts and Science, as well as the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education/College of Education. I also sent copies to the Department of Urban Studies/College of Architecture and the College of Forestry and Agriculture. As departments were housed in the College of Arts and Sciences emerged into Colleges, a new building came online to house the College of Education. A new building was in the early planning stages for Arts and Sciences. So the deans couldn’t ignore the geography budget, we figured, as they would have space emerging. The Consultant Report was essential in defending my requests when Deans each called me about my proposed geography needs. The splendid lecture to faculty and to the student body by Pierce Lewis the spring of 1971 was the added bolster that pushed the university decision makers to support the newly proposed program, and to promise resources for it. Lewis’ visit was through the AAG Visiting Scientist Program.

In summary, with help, this geography development is one I initiated in the fall of 1970, and led, planned and inserted where none existed. In the ‘60’s, those developing the engineering and agriculture campus into a major University had planned none. But the Sabaroff’s successful petition on the need for geography on campus helped Rose fight to get a committed faculty line for a geographer from the department of Education, a key event in my coming.

1971—1972

I recruited Charles Good who came aboard in the fall of 1971 as an associate professor. My rank as an assistant professor, lesser than his, my Ph.D., more recent than his - although I was a professional for many years and more than ten years Charles’ senior- meant difficulty for our program with deans who were very rank conscious. Then too, being “female” in a then male environment was another minus. Because of tension,

Geography development at VPI and SU, First years, p4 08/22/06
not with Charles, but with academic hierarchy, Charles and I reached a mutual decision where he would have formal leadership, but between us, he would make no decision regarding the geography program that I did not concur with. Hence Charles Good became Geography Program leader the third year. His first year he was focused on his upcoming field work in Africa; upon his return, he gave considerable energy, effort and focus to further the acceptance of the geography program. Although my formulation, he worked with me to edited and tightened the PROPOSAL, to make it responsive to campus curricula review at various levels.

Interviews were set up at our national meetings with those who responded to my job ad. I mailed them an outline of the geography program structure and curricula. If they couldn’t accept the program and its conceptual structure, I went on to another candidate. This was a “deal breaker”. Fortunately, Charles embraced the structure, and while it has been modified over the years by the succession of geography faculty, the overall structure, Charles told me a number of years ago, is pretty much intact today. He told me that Robert Morrill was invaluable asset toward this continuity.

1973-1974

Charles Good and I hired additional faculty, and by my third year, we had two other colleagues, each of whom bought into the structure. When it became clear that my aggressive success espousing geography would undermine my bid for tenure from the College of Education, and I had offers from two major universities that spring of 1973, Charles and I had a heart to heart talk about the pro’s and con’s of my staying or leaving. Charles remarked that replacing me could easily require three full time faculty and each would feel they had a full load! So working with Charles, we then recruited my successor, Robert Morrill, a Duane Knos protégé from Clarke U, a candidate acceptable to both the Colleges. Accordingly, I felt comfortable leaving “my baby” in such competent hands as Charles and the other geographers at VPI, for new opportunities at the University of Maryland, where I stayed until my retirement. Charles grew the department in stature and depth. Accordingly, he came to feel over the years a great deal of ownership of the department. And rightly he should! I had won program approval; it was he, after I left, that won departmental and graduate program approval.

Before letting any others in on my decision to leave, I had an occasion to meet with Dr. Malpus. He greeted me with praise for what I had accomplished so short a time for the university and geography. He remembered his telling me to think ten years when I had told him three, and we both had fun reminiscing over that. He also praised my competency in, and knowledge of, my field. Then I suggested that since he recognized my excellence, he might want to increase my salary to at least the average of campus remuneration. VP Malpus exclaimed: “Why Dixie, you’re single! What ever would you do with the money?””, an excellent example of the bias, then a part of VPI’s academic culture. Another example within the then small community: prior to my decision to leave, a new faculty in education who made less than I, found local mortgage money for the Geography development at VPI and SU, First years, p5 08/22/06
same model home I had selected to be built. I had a higher salary, but lenders at the local bank approved his application, not mine, primarily said the bank manager, because I was female, and females were less responsible, he found, than men.

There were several farewell parties for me, but I remember the one the geographers held in our new digs in McBride. They presented me with two beautiful and expensively potted plants, one a cactus to honor my geographic origins and the other, a Norfolk pine, to remember Virgina and its new program and the geographers at VPI.

Epilogue

Charles invited me to serve on his department’s graduate program development committee and it was my pleasure to so serve.

Attachments:

1. Table of Content and Forward from Proposal for geography’s establishment
2. Top page from Appendix A of Proposal dated August, 1971
3. Top and last page of 14 pages titled ”Geography and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University” (This manuscript was delivered orally; and describes developments with accompanying problems that the AAG’s Bureau could help with, including campus changes on March 13th which rescinded some expected resources. It well may be that this is the “talk” I gave in Las Vegas, but it isn’t dated. The comprehensive degree program proposal with its Appendices was distributed there, as said elsewhere; and perhaps the original of this paper is also with the PPOSAL and its Appendices in the AAG archives.)