Geography at West Texas A&M University
The Evolution of a Stand-Alone Program, 1910-2005

By

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Abstract

West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas, has offered courses in geography since 1910, when the institution opened as West Texas State Normal College. In 1920, the school added a major in the discipline. Yet for much of its history, geography has been a “stand-alone” program, consisting of one faculty member and, since the late 1970s, housed within larger, multidisciplinary departments. The geography program’s limited faculty, resources, and institutional status, as well as changes in the administration of the university, have greatly—and sometimes negatively—affected its growth and development. At the same time, geography faculty and occasionally supportive administrators have aided the program’s positive development, allowing the department to support and reflect national methodological and pedagogical trends. Thus, the geography program at West Texas A&M University has evolved in five stages: a pre-establishment phase prior to 1920; a period of establishment between 1920 and 1951 that saw the creation of a Department of Geography and the department’s eventual embrace of possibilism; the introduction of field courses and the expansion of the department from one to five faculty members between 1951 and 1973; the department’s return to “stand-alone” status and its merger with other departments from 1973 to the 1990s; and a period of instability that has plagued the program since the mid-1990s.
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Introduction

Recently, the challenges faced by those working in “stand-alone” geography programs have begun to receive attention among academics (N.A. 2005). These programs typically consist of one faculty member and often are housed within larger, multidisciplinary departments, as a result of which the status of these programs within their respective colleges or universities tends to be low. Needless to say, the histories of stand-alone programs are not well documented in American geographical literature, as most geographers who work in such programs orient their professional and research efforts toward areas other than the compilation of their program’s history.

For much of its history, West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas, has housed one such stand-alone geography program. Geography has been part of the school’s curriculum since 1910, when the institution—then known as West Texas State Normal College—first opened its doors in the Texas Panhandle. The school has offered an academic major in geography since 1920. Yet the geography program’s orientation and its fortunes have changed often, both as a result of national and university-wide trends and because of the small number of faculty that have been association with geography.

The geography program at West Texas A&M University has passed through five stages in its history. Prior to 1920, geography remained a minor component of the institution’s educational vision, as the young discipline typically was represented by one physical or world geography course taught annually by one of several non-geographers. A second phase commenced in 1920 with the establishment of a Department of Geography. From that time until shortly after World War II, the program moved from a philosophical position informed by environmental determinism to one of possibilism, the idea that the environment influences but does not determine the course of cultural development. Postwar personnel changes at the college ushered in a period during which the growing department introduced a variety of systematic and applied courses to what historically had been a regional-geography program. By the 1970s, as a result of institution-wide decline in enrollments, geography at the renamed West Texas State University entered a period of rapid decline, reflected both in a steady decline in enrollments and in the program’s relative lack of institutional clout during the 1970s and 1980s. Since shortly before the program became a part of the Department of History and Political Science in 1996, geography has entered a fifth phase in which faculty have attempted to stabilize the program, redefine its role within the university, and expand its function and importance, but a high turnover rate among geography faculty has resulted in only limited success in these areas.

Pre-Establishment, 1910-1920

West Texas State Normal College was established by act of the Texas legislature on March 31, 1909. In November, the Texas State Board of Education chose Canyon as the site for the new college, perhaps in part because the twenty-six-year-old community had offered forty acres and $100,100 with which to construct and equip a classroom building (Hill 1959, 16, 29-30; West Texas State Normal College 1910). A three-storey Spanish Renaissance building opened in
December, 1910, just over two months after the school's first students enrolled for classes in downtown Canyon (West Texas State Normal College 1912).

West Texas State was established to "prepare teachers for teaching in the public schools" (West Texas State Normal College 1910 [quoted]; Hill 1959, 10). Prior to 1917 the institution offered no college-level degrees, although it did offer programs leading to a teacher's diploma and to three- and six-year teaching certificates. The opportunity to earn the diploma or a certificate was extended only to "any white person of good moral character, free of contagious diseases, over sixteen years of age, and who has a fair knowledge of the ordinary common school branches" (West Texas State Normal College 1910). Officially, the university admitted only white students until 1920, but it appears to have remained segregated until 1959 when, according to the school's annual student yearbook, at least three African American women attended the institution (West Texas State Normal College 1910-1920; Le Mirage 1920-1960).

Geography was a small part of the normal-school educational experience in the early years of West Texas State Normal College. In 1910 the institution offered one course in the relatively new field of geography. Over the next decade, the name of this course alternated between "Geography," "Economic Geography," "World Geography," and "General Geography," and at various times was taught by professors of agriculture, criticism, history, German, and physical education (West Texas State Normal College 1910-1919). This arrangement was typical of American teachers' colleges in the early twentieth century, where geography had yet to be recognized as a separate, established discipline (James and Martin 1981, 294).

The content of geography courses at West Texas State Normal College generally mirrored the environmental determinism that typified the emerging discipline within the United States (316). The school's 1910 catalog describes the geography course as one in which "there will be kept constantly in mind the geographic influences upon the various activities of mankind" (West Texas State Normal College 1910). By the end of the decade, the course stressed the "influence of geographical conditions on manners of life, industries, cities, and historic events" (West Texas State Normal College, 1918; 1919). In 1919 the institution added a new class in physiography, reflecting the discipline's scientific nature, its traditional emphasis on physical geography, and its continued philosophical groundings in environmental determinism (West Texas State Normal College 1919; James and Martin 287-290, 294-296).

By 1916, West Texas State Normal College boasted of an enrollment of 536 students, more than 2.3 times the number that attended the institution in 1910, and a new main building that replaced the original one which had burned in 1914 (West Texas A&M University 2003, A-3; Hill 54-55). With improved facilities and increased attendance at Texas normal colleges, in 1917 the institution at Canyon was authorized to offer college-level courses leading to a bachelor's degree (Hill 71). Although World War I and funding problems interrupted its growth, the school's new function necessitated the expansion of the college curriculum (Hill 76; Randall County News June 24, 1920). Thus, in 1920 the institution established the Department of Geography, and hired Darthula A. Walker as its first trained geographer (West Texas State Normal College 1920; The Prairie October 4, 1920).

**Darthula Walker's Department, 1920-1945**

Two years prior to the establishment of a Department of Geography, Joseph A. Hill succeeded Robert B. Cousins to become the school's second president (Hill 76). Hill had
overseen the institution's history program since 1910, including three years during which the program was responsible for the school's geography class. By 1920, both the expansion of the college's educational mission and faculty-retention problems resulting from low wages may have given Hill an opening through which to advance the creation of a geography program (Randall County News 24 June 1920), although in his history of the college he gave no indication of why he did so (Hill 81).

Hill personally involved himself in the recruitment of new faculty during the summer of 1920 (Randall County News 22 July 1920). In Darthula Walker, he hired a person whom he saw as a "modest, quiet, scholarly woman, yet she had a fine sense of humor, a keen interest in public affairs, a strong loyalty to her country and to her church and rare dedication to her professional responsibilities" (Hill and Adair 1962, 49). Walker was born in Tennessee in 1880, and moved with her family to Cleburne, Texas sometime before 1900. Upon her graduation from high school, she taught high-school classes in Latin both in Tennessee and Texas (N.A. 1938; Hill and Adair 49). After twelve years of teaching, she entered George Peabody College for Teachers, during a period in which she likely encountered Lizzie Bloomstein, the school's renowned history and geography teacher (West Texas State Normal College 1920; Conkin 2002, 118). Walker received her bachelor's degree in 1916, but interrupted her graduate education to become a member of the Research Division of the United States Shipping Board in Washington during World War I. She then spent a semester teaching geography at Mississippi State College for Women as she completed her master's degree, which she received in 1919 (Roper 2005).

In 1919, Walker joined the faculty at Sam Houston Normal Institute as Assistant Professor of Geography. Although she spent only one year at Sam Houston Normal Institute, while there Walker met Harriet Smith, a renowned geographer among those teaching at normal colleges. Smith and Walker later would collaborate on a high-school textbook, The Geography of Texas (Smith and Walker 1923).

From the start, the Department of Geography at West Texas State reflected Darthula Walker's training and experiences. Carl Sauer had not yet revolutionized the field of geography with his "Morphology of Landscape," and a preoccupation with physical geography and environmental determinism continued to dominate the discipline throughout the United States (Sauer 1925; Gade 1976, 43; Marcus 1979, 525-525; James and Martin 319). Not surprisingly, Walker's first classes at West Texas State Normal College reflected the period. The geographer taught Elements of Geography and two courses in Commercial and Industrial Geography, all at the normal-school level. At the college level, Walker taught Physiography; regional courses on North America, Europe, and the American South; a class entitled "Teaching of Geography"; and one tellingly listed as "Geographical Influences on American History" (West Texas State Normal College 1920). By 1927, West Texas State Teacher's College (as it was renamed in 1923) offered fourteen college-level courses, including Principles of Human Geography, Geography of Texas, Conservation of Natural Resources, and Problems in Geography (West Texas State Teachers College 1927; Hill 324). Of all of these courses, North America, Geography of Texas, and Conservation of Natural Resources have been listed in the institution's course catalogs every year since their inception, albeit sometimes under different names (today they are known as United States and Canada, Texas, and Environment and Man, respectively).

Walker kept apprised of developments in the field by taking advantage of external educational opportunities, and in her choices she emphasized programs that featured established geographers. She enrolled in classes at institutions such as the University of Chicago and Clark
University, at the latter of which she appears to have worked with noted anthropogeographer and environmental determinist Ellen Churchill Semple (Koelsch 1987, 131; James and Martin 313; Peet 1985, 317-324; West Texas State Normal College 1920-1922; West Texas State Teachers College 1923-1930). Semple clearly influenced Walker; for much of her first decade in Canyon, in fact, Walker utilized textbooks written by Semple and other environmental determinists in her classes (West Texas State Normal College 1920-1922; West Texas State Teachers College 1923-1929).

The department’s philosophical leanings shifted toward Sauer-influenced possibilism and regional geography in the 1930s. Bessie Engle joined the department in 1930 as Assistant Professor of Geography after receiving two bachelor’s degrees in education at Ohio State. A year later, the college employed a third geographer, W. C. White. White had graduated with a master’s degree from George Peabody College for Teachers at a time during which geography was among that school’s strongest disciplines, yet natural sciences were particularly weak (Conkin 221). Walker, meanwhile, continued to spend time at major centers of geographic learning in the United States, including the University of Colorado, the University of California, and the University of Texas (N.A.). The arrival of White and Engle, Walker’s continued education, and the decision of the Board of Regents to offer graduate-level courses beginning in 1931 likely contributed to a decision to reorganize the geography department’s course offerings (West Texas State Teachers College 1930-1936). By 1932, Geographic Influences on American History had been renamed Historical Geography of the United States, and course descriptions were altered to remove references to environmental determinism. The department offered sixteen classes, among them five combined graduate-undergraduate courses, two teacher-education classes, nine regional classes, and a short-lived field course entitled “Observation Studies in the Canyon Region” (West Texas State Teachers College 1932).

The geography department’s personnel gains were short-lived. In response to the Great Depression, West Texas State Teachers College suspended its graduate program in 1933. The institution also reduced geography course offerings to eleven, and did not rehire Engle or White for the 1933-34 academic year. The graduate program resumed in 1936, with Walker offering three graduate classes, but the institution would not add a second geographer until after World War II.

According to J. A. Hill, the college administration foresaw the “inevitability of war” as early as 1939 (Hill 136). Classes in Asian and European geography had been offered at West Texas State since 1932 and 1920, respectively, so Walker was well positioned to offer instruction in subjects that, by the end of the 1930s, would take on greater importance to students at West Texas State (West Texas State Normal College 1920-1922; West Texas State Teachers College 1922-1932). The 1941 course catalog, published in the spring, stated that geography courses had “been planned to serve as part of the training for teachers in social studies, to provide helpful training for those preparing for a business career, and to help prepare all students to become more effective citizens of this modern world” (West Texas State Teachers College 1941). By 1944, as if to remove any doubt about the field’s utility, the program description also included a reference to geography’s importance in furnishing “much needed training for military service” (West Texas State Teachers College 1944).
Growth, 1945-1973

Nationally, the subfield of regional geography emerged after World War II with renewed vigor. According to John Fraser Hart, post-war geography faculty throughout the United States "stressed regional geography, because they had learned that organized knowledge about places was important. Students liked regional courses, because such courses were relevant both to their own wartime experiences and to the task of reconstructing a war torn world" (Hart 1979, 109). Furthermore, fieldwork became a cornerstone of geographic inquiry in the 1950s (110-111). In general, physical geography was considerably weaker than it had been before 1941, its practitioners relegated to "descriptive and classifying activities" in the wake of the demise of environmental determinism (Marcus 524). Nevertheless, climatology, meteorology, and cartography found receptive audiences at American colleges, particularly as war veterans returned to school with a new appreciation for those skills (Skaggs 2004, 446, 448; Maxfield 2003, 24; Hart 109-110; Smith 1987, 157).

Geographers' relative lack of interest in some forms of physical geography and their embrace of cultural ecology, regional and economic geography, applied geography, and field methods led to a mild crisis of identity within the field (Hart 110). Although this problem would contribute to the far-reaching decision to eliminate geography from the curriculum at Harvard University in 1948 (Smith), the Department of Geography at West Texas State Teachers College--renamed West Texas State College in 1949--appears to have been in no such danger. Courses in economic, historical, and political geography may have helped students to "become more effective citizens" of the world or to find careers in business, but the regional courses enhanced the school's teacher-training programs, making the discipline essential to the college.

In 1949, however, the popular Dartheula Walker was nearing retirement. Therefore, the college announced that Dr. Colbert Held would join the West Texas State faculty as Professor of Geography and Head of the Department. Held was a recent graduate of Clark University, then dominated by political geographer Samuel Van Valkenburg (Koelsch 173), and had received bachelor's and master's degrees from Baylor and Northwestern Universities, respectively (West Texas State College 1950). He clearly enjoyed his time in Canyon, recalling "the most positive memories" of that period and of his friendships with a variety of West Texas State personalities whose names would become prominent in the school's history. Held also remembers Walker, who remained with the department for another two years, as a "grand lady and a committed teacher," and "an admirable woman whose dedication [to teaching and the advancement of geography] deserves attention" (Held 2004). Under Held's leadership, the department opened and supervised a cooperative weather reporting station on campus in February, 1950 (Hill 354; The Prairie 5 October 1951). By his own assessment, however, Colbert Held's role in the history of West Texas State geography was relatively modest, and he resigned at the end of the academic year to accept a position at the University of Nebraska (Hill 354).

Wallace E. McIntyre succeeded Held in 1950. McIntyre had earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Illinois State Normal College and Clark University, respectively, and recently had completed an appointment as Instructor of Geography at the University of New Hampshire as he worked toward his doctorate at Clark (West Texas State College 1951; The Prairie 15 September 1950; 8 June 1951). He also appears to have understood the changes occurring nationally within the field. Although he, too, remained at West Texas State College for only one academic year, under his direction the department added a lower-level class in Map
Reading and Drawing and advanced courses in Climatology and Elementary Meteorology, the latter of which utilized the university’s cooperative weather station (West Texas State College 1951).

After the 1950-51 academic year, Wallace McIntyre completed his doctorate and accepted a position at Illinois State Normal College, and seventy-one-year-old Darthula Walker retired as Associate Professor of Geography (The Prairie 8 June 1951; 21 September 1951; West Texas State College 1952). Lacking an experienced geographer and having had difficulty attracting geographers willing to remain in Canyon for more than a year, the college was fortunate in hiring Murry Measamer as Professor of Geography in 1951. Perhaps not coincidentally, Measamer’s academic experiences mirrored those of Darthula Walker. Described by the school newspaper as “tall, distinguished appearing and quiet spoken,” as an undergraduate Measamer attended college for two years before he realized that his academic interests lay in geography. He transferred to the University of Tennessee, from which he received bachelor and master of science degrees in geography, and in 1940 earned his Ph.D. in geography education at George Peabody for Teachers (West Texas State College 1952; Conkin 254; The Prairie 5 October 1951). He also taught meteorology in the armed forces during World War II (The Prairie 5 October 1951).

Murry Measamer remained at West Texas State from 1951 until his retirement in 1967. Like others in the field both before and since, Measamer sometimes found that he had to defend his chosen discipline as being more than a simple “study of places.” His definition was an inclusive one; as he told a student during his first year in Canyon, “geography is actually the study of everything connected with people,” including “weather, climate, topography, customs, politics, and economic patterns” (The Prairie 5 October 1951). He continued to teach Elementary Meteorology, Climatology, and Conservation of Natural Resources, as well as many of the regional courses that he inherited from Darthula Walker (Europe, Anglo-America, Asia and the Pacific Realm, Latin America, and Texas). He also made economic geography a priority, offering lower-level classes in industrial and commercial geography as well as an upper-level course in the subject.

Measamer attempted to guide the discipline at West Texas State into areas that reflected the changing nature of geography at the national and international levels. Between 1953 and 1958, the geographer introduced three courses that involved field work in the American West, the Eastern United States, and the American South and Cuba. (All three courses were discontinued in 1960—a tumultuous time in the histories of both the South and Cuba—although non-field-based classes in the American South and the Historical Geography of the United States appeared in the college catalog in 1962.) He offered regional classes in Africa and the Soviet Union—both cutting-edge topics among regional geographers in the late 1950s and 1960s—as well as new courses in Cartography and Urban Geography (West Texas State College 1952-1961; West Texas State University 1962-1967). By 1965, the catalog of West Texas State University (the institution’s new name beginning in 1962) listed 22 geography classes (West Texas State University 1965).

During a sixteen-year period in which overall enrollment at West Texas State rose from 1999 to 6100 students, Measamer clearly strengthened the geography program. In January 1953, he and a group of students established the Alpha Omega chapter of Gamma Theta Upsilon, the international honor society in geography (Maxfield 62; Le Mirage 1953). The number of students active in the chapter grew from eight in 1955 to 22 in 1966, and by 1973 approximately 150 West Texas State students had been initiated as members (Maxfield 62; Le Mirage 1955-1966).
Perhaps the best indication of the strength of the geography program, however, came with the hiring of three successive temporary geography faculty: Instructor James E. Thompson in 1957, Assistant Professor William Morris Holmes in 1961, and Instructor Larry Edd Frazier in 1967. All three faculty members received their undergraduate degrees in geography from the institution (West Texas State College 1958-1961, West Texas State University 1962-1968; *Le Mirage* 1950-1967).

Despite Measamer’s success at training geographers, nationally the growth of the discipline—and, during the Vietnam War, of university enrollments in general—resulted in what one West Texas State publication called “an acute shortage of geographers” (James and Martin 1978, 149-150; *Le Mirage* 1968, 207). Murry Measamer’s retirement in 1967, therefore, came at an inopportune time for the program. Geography’s strong enrollments at the institution encouraged the administration to rebuild the department with four new geographers: Assistant Professors Robert Sawvell and John Muthershough, both of whom had received master’s degrees at Indiana University; instructor Kenneth Breheob, who recently had graduated with his master’s degree from Ball State University; and Larry Edd Frazier (West Texas State University 1968).

With Sawvell serving as Acting Head while he completed his Ph.D. through the University of Oklahoma, the department made few adjustments to the geography program. By 1973, in addition to nine regional courses which Sawvell (2004) recalls primarily supported the education program, the department offered lower-level classes in Physical Geography, Meteorology, Population, Economic Geography, Environmental Conservation, as well as one entitled Nature and Scope of Geography. Upper-level courses included Agricultural Geography, Cartography, Urban Geography, Political Geography, Historical Geography, and two special-topics classes (West Texas State University 1973). The department offered major programs in geography (Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science), geographic education, social sciences, and social studies education, as well as a geography minor, and boasted of a well-equipped cartography laboratory (West Texas State University 1969-1973). In 1969, Frazier departed and the university added a third tenure-track position, hiring Nebraska graduate Charles E. Nelson as Assistant Professor of Geography, and welcomed Dan Patterson as geography instructor. Also that year, the department sponsored talks by eight conservationists, as well as a visit by Dean S. Rugg of the University of Nebraska (*Le Mirage* 1970, 224). By 1970, the department had added another tenure-track geographer to its faculty, Assistant Professor Gary T. Whiteford. The school’s Gamma Theta Upsilon chapter remained active, sponsoring field trips for its members and, in 1968-69, organizing the department’s map library, which by 1973 amounted to 50,000 maps (*Le Mirage* 1969, 240; West Texas State University 1973). However, these achievements came in spite of university-wide changes that soon would cause geography’s rapid decline at West Texas State University.

**Geography’s Decline, 1973-1990**

James P. Cornette, the third president of West Texas State University, retired in 1973 after twenty-five years in his position (Petersen n.d.). The effects of his departure were far-reaching. Darthula Walker had worked under the administration of J. A. Hill for all but three of her thirty-one years at West Texas State, while Murry Measamer had worked under Cornette only. The school’s newest geography faculty, however, worked at an institution that suffered from comparative instability in its administrative leadership, as six men would serve as University
president in the two decades after Cornette’s retirement.

While West Texas State University’s enrollment increased from 6,537 to 7,935 between 1967 and 1969, it had dropped to 6,791 by 1973, and would continue to decline until 1989, when it bottomed out at 5,718 (West Texas A&M University 2003, A3). According to historian Peter Petersen, “out of the many factors in this turnaround, it is likely that changes in the selective service system and increases in tuition were primary.” Furthermore, inflationary pressures and a sudden decline in the student body led the Board of Regents to suspend the granting of tenure and promotions and to terminate some non-tenured faculty. Lloyd Watkins, who succeeded Cornette as the institution’s president in 1973, could do little to improve the situation, and resigned after four years to accept the presidency of Illinois State University (Petersen n.d.).

In the early 1970s, declining university enrollments and a reduced budget clearly put pressure on the geography department. The department’s Gamma Theta Upsilon chapter became inactive after 1973, and by 1974 the department had lost the services of Kenneth Brehob, Dan Patterson, and Gary Whiteford, and Charles Nelson. David L. Wheeler joined the institution’s faculty as Professor of Geography and Dean of the Graduate School, but his activities within the department were limited to teaching only an occasional course in historical geography (Sawvell).

Tied to the reduction in geography faculty was a decline in enrollment, particularly in the department’s regional courses. Sawvell recalls that the number of education majors in regional geography classes fell in the early 1970s, and since “most of the regional courses were intended for education majors,” enrollments did not support their continuation. Furthermore, Sawvell believed that systematic courses in geography would better prepare the program’s graduates for “a wider variety of jobs in geography” and to “better prepare them for graduate school since most graduate schools in the Texas-Oklahoma area had moved away from the regional courses” (Sawvell). In fact, West Texas State University catalogs of the time advertised that geography students could “concentrate on a program designed for employment opportunities in land-use planning or travel management” (West Texas State University 1974-1977). As a result of its new focus, the department combined five regional courses in to one class entitled Regional Geography, although United States and Canada as well as Texas continued to be taught separately. World Regional Geography also was offered at the introductory level, but Sawvell reorganized it and renamed it Cultural Geography in 1980. The institution also added an advanced cartography class—which included computer mapping among its topics—and one entitled Map Reading and Interpretation, and retained its classes in Meteorology, Environmental Conservation (renamed Environment and Man in 1981), Economic Geography, Urban Geography, Political Geography, and Historical Geography (West Texas State University 1973-1981).

Enrollments continued to decline despite the reorganization, reflecting overall trends at the university. In 1977 the institution’s new president, Max Sherman, announced a restructuring, eliminating several executive and administrative positions and merging several departments (Petersen). On March 7, 1978, Dean Theodore Freidell proposed that the Department of Geography merge with the five-member Department of Geology-Anthropology to form a new Department of Geosciences. Freidell’s recommendation rested on three points: that the “size of the geography faculty (2) no longer warrants the administrative costs of maintaining a separate department,” that the two departments shared a “traditional discipline compatibility,” and that the “reorganization should result in increased cooperation between the departments and hopefully assist in the growth of both” (Freidell 1978). The Board of Regents approved the merger on April 11, 1978 (Shannon 1978).
In some ways, both programs did benefit from the merger. For example, enrollments in cartography classes were bolstered by graduate students in geology. According to Sawvell, "one or two geology students took the course and produced such good graphics for their theses that the department encouraged all students to take Cart I (some even took II)" (Sawvell). Furthermore, Mutthersbough and Sawvell each taught Earth Science II, an introductory Geosciences course covering the atmosphere, hydrosphere, and earth-sun relationships; Sawvell's laboratory exercises continue to be utilized in that class today.

By 1979, Sawvell had become chairperson of the Department of Geosciences. The geographer recalls that during this time, "falling university enrollments created big problems in geography enrollment." The department's oldest course, Physical Geography (once known as Physiography), was eliminated after 1981, as were Historical Geography of the United States, Nature and Scope of Geography, Economic Geography, and Urban Geography (West Texas State University 1980-1983). Sawvell remembers that the "bottom fell out of geology enrollment" at about this time, reducing the popularity of Cartography I and leading to the elimination of Cartography II after 1983 (Sawvell; West Texas State University 1984). Meanwhile, Mutthersbough had become the university's foreign-student advisor, and as his administrative duties increased, the number of geography courses offered each semester shrunk. When Mutthersbough retired in 1989, Sawvell found that he "could not get anyone in authority to talk with me about new faculty. Frankly, it came down to money and geography was not a large priority for those in power" (Sawvell).

Thus by 1990, the geography program again had been reduced to one faculty member. There was an important distinction, however, between geography in the 1990s and the discipline before 1967. In Sawvell's words, West Texas geography "essentially became a service 'department'/subject area rather than a program. And when you are a service area rather than a program you have very little 'clout'" (Sawvell).

Reestablishing Geography, 1990-2002

West Texas State University became a member of the Texas A&M System in 1990, and three years later was renamed West Texas A&M University. With the hiring of Russell C. Long as the university's ninth president in 1993, the institution's leadership problems stabilized, as did student enrollments (Petersen n.d.). Despite the resulting growth in geography enrollments, however, the program itself entered a period of uncertainty. The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed Sawvell's retirement, the hiring and resignation of two successive replacements, three years in which the program was not headed by a full-time geographer, and the movement of the program from the Department of Life, Earth, and Environmental Sciences (of which the Department of Geosciences became a part through a series of mergers in the 1980s) to the Department of History and Political Science.

During the early 1990s, Sawvell continued his work to restore the geography program. He was highly respected by students and faculty alike for his teaching abilities, and his decision to add a regional geography course on Europe and the Soviet Union in 1991 attests to his concern that students—even those from an insular, conservative culture such as that of the Panhandle-Plains region—understand important world trends in geographical context (West Texas State University 1991). Geography enrollments did begin to improve during this period. Cultural Geography proved to be a popular class, as did the Texas and United States courses. Political
Geography was renamed Contemporary Political World in 1995, and was cross-listed under both Geography (GEOG) and Political Science (POSC) prefixes (West Texas A&M University 1995). On the other hand, Cartography was discontinued in the mid-1990s. Sawvell, like others in the field, had moved toward computer-assisted cartography by this time, and he found that the cost of modernizing the program compared with likely enrollments "simply made development impossible" (Sawvell).

Cartography aside, the geography program’s improved enrollments correspond not only with the university’s improved situation, but also with a national trend that focus attention on the discipline. In 1987, prospects for the discipline improved when President Ronald Reagan proclaimed the third week in November to be National Geography Awareness Week (Reagan 1987). The National Geographic Society used the week to promote the discipline as being essential to primary- and secondary-school education (National Geographic Society n.d.).

However, the small geography program at West Texas A&M University continued to receive little attention, remaining nearly invisible in a large department that also included geology, anthropology, biology, and environmental sciences programs. Few people, in fact, seemed to understand exactly what geography entailed, only that it had become a desired part of primary- and secondary-school education. A perception among faculty members that the institution was on the "short end of the Texas Higher Education funding pipeline" did not improve the program's situation (Sando 2004). Perhaps out of frustration or for more personal reasons, Sawvell—who was as important to the evolution of the geography program as had been Darthula Walker and Murry Measamer—retired suddenly in August, 1996, only days before the start of a new semester.

Recognizing geography's potential importance to teacher-certification programs, university administrators saw Sawvell's resignation as an opportunity to strengthen geography's ties to teacher education. Thus, on a Friday afternoon only days before the start of the new semester, James Calvi, the new chair of the Department of History and Political Sciences at that time, received a phone call from Ted Guffy, Dean of the School of Education and Social Sciences. Guffy informed Calvi—who already had returned home for the weekend—that the geography program was to be moved into his department, and that he had three days to find someone to teach the Sawvell's classes in the coming years. Calvi was able to find a local high-school geography teacher who held a master's degree to teach sections of cultural geography and upper-level classes such as Geography of the United States, but the university cancelled upper-level classes that lacked an instructor (Calvi 2004).

A year later, the department hired Paul Sando as Assistant Professor of Geography. Sando joined the faculty of West Texas A&M University after receiving his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of North Dakota and his doctorate from Indiana State University. The young geographer and his family rented a house from Robert and Barbara Sawvell, so Sawvell continued to influence the geography program. Sando considered the Sawvelles to be "mentors, friends, landlords, neighbors" and, to his young son, "surrogate grandparents" (Sando 2004).

Sando inherited a program in disarray. He had no majors; in fact, he found that he was simply expected to cover the large Cultural Geography sections which, in his words, "were absolutely necessary for the education program and that was it. Anything else was extra." He also found that he "really had to defend the purpose of geography," and spent "a lot of time convincing people of the importance of geography as a discipline." To address this last point, Sando promoted geography within the Department of History and Political Science as a field that "could help other disciplines as a multidisciplinary research and teaching tool." In particular, he
endorsed the utility of cartography and Geographic Information Systems, and before long was receiving requests—particularly from political scientists—to produce maps for their research and teaching projects (Sando 2004).

Sando recognized that to survive at West Texas A&M University, the geography program must grow. However, he saw this as a long-term process. He managed to "get a small number of majors" in four years, including three who graduated during that time and one who attended graduate school at Southwest Texas State University. Two of his students reactivated the university’s Gamma Theta Upsilon chapter, and in his assessment, his "teaching success made geography courses more popular with students," thereby increasing upper-level enrollments (Sando 2004). He created an introductory class in Geographic Information Systems, and otherwise renewed interest in technical aspects of geography that largely had been absent from the university since the early 1990s. In 2001, however, Sando accepted a position at Minnesota State University at Moorhead to be closer to family (Sando 2004). With the Department of History and Political Science unable to find a suitable replacement on short notice, historian Elizabeth Morrow Clark taught sections of Cultural Geography during the 2001-02 academic year.

Geography Since 2002

I arrived at West Texas A&M University during the summer of 2002. After more than three years as a selectman in a small New Hampshire town, during which period I also served nearby as an adjunct professor at a small private college, I was ready to enter academia full-time. I graduated from the University of Kansas in 1997, where I completed a dissertation that analyzed the role of regional images and perceptions in the reconfiguration of an early twentieth-century New England village (Roper 1997, 2001). Yet during my years in Kansas and, prior to that, at the University of North Dakota (M.A. 1993) and Clark University (B.A. 1991), I had developed a fondness for North American regions, and I was eager to return to the West and to apply my interests in cultural geography, cultural landscapes, and humanistic geography to the region.

During my first few months in Canyon, I found that only three geography majors remained from Sando’s time at West Texas A&M University; I met only one of those students, however, as all had completed their geography requirements or soon would leave the university. In speaking with Dean Guffy, Provost Flavius Killebrew, and Wade Shaffer (who became head of the Department of History and Political Science in 2001), I realized the precarious situation in which the geography program found itself: essentially, if the number of majors who graduated did not increase, the university likely would cancel both the B.A. and B.S. programs in geography. At the same time, I was instructed to support the teacher-certification program by offering Texas, United States, and Elements and Uses of Maps, Globes, and Atlases; support the university’s core curriculum by teaching Earth Science II and Cultural Geography; teach one class required by Geosciences majors (Meteorology), and offer directed-study classes each semester.

My first efforts to improve the geography program involved analyzing the program’s strengths and weaknesses, and comparing course offerings with what students—particularly teachers—are expected to know when they graduate from West Texas A&M University. Considering teacher-certification requirements, I recognized that students should know more about world cultures and physical regions than what the program offered to them. I realized, furthermore, that basic map-interpretation and atlas-use skills already were an important part of the Earth Science classes, and that I could also introduce them in Cultural Geography as well.
Therefore, I eliminated Elements and Uses of Maps, Globes, and Atlases and replaced it with an advanced course in World Regional Geography. Additionally, because of the limited scope of the program’s course offerings, I replaced the Europe class—which I did not see as potentially attracting significant numbers of students—with a Special Topics in Geography course. I taught the class twice, once as Baseball and Culture and once as Geography of Religion.

During my three years at West Texas A&M University, I made teaching a priority. Although enrollments in Cultural Geography fell substantially after my first semester, advanced courses such as Texas and United States and Canada grew significantly, with enrollments typically reaching between 35 and 40 students. The popularity of geography as a major increased as well; in 2004 and early 2005, the number of majors generally remained steady at between ten and twelve, and four students graduated during the 2004-05 academic year. In addition, unofficially I advised three students from other majors who wish to attend graduate school in geography.

Although few of my students had taken classes with Paul Sando, his efforts on behalf of geography at West Texas A&M University helped to stabilize the program after he left. Sando had been a visible presence on campus, actively promoting the importance of geography to academics in other fields. As a result, I was able to concentrate my efforts on forging connections with contacts outside the university, soliciting outside advice an guidance in an effort to strengthen the program and make it more visible.

Yet like Sando, I also forged ties with other programs, particularly if to do so would increase the number of geography offerings available to students at West Texas A&M University. For example, I worked with Assistant Professors Harry Hueston and Bryan Vizzini, authors of Terrorism 101 (Hueston and Vizzini 2003), to create an interdisciplinary course entitled “The Islamic World.” This class was designed to bridge the fields of geography, criminal justice, and history to provide a balanced look at Islam and its relationships with the developing and developed world, both past and present. In my mind, this course complemented another that I had developed, an offshoot of World Regional Geography entitled “The Middle East.” My hope was to allow students working in geography and in related disciplines to concentrate their regional studies in an area outside the United States, and to better understand the relationships between the United States, the Middle East, and Islam at a time in which such understanding appears essential.

Finally, with the growth of the geography program since 2002, student demand for social and other extracurricular resources grew as well. As a result, in 2003 a number of students worked to revitalize the Alpha Omega chapter of Gamma Theta Upsilon. Officially, the chapter had been reactivated in 2001 by two students who majored in geography under Paul Sando, but as those students had graduated, the organization again verged on deactivation. Members chose to maintain it as a social club, meeting once per month at international-themed restaurants in and around Amarillo. Two years later a group of majors and nonmajors formed the Geography Club, which is designed to promote geography on the West Texas A&M University campus through field trips, lectures, and social activities. The club inaugurated the Murry Measamer Lecture Series, a twice-annual lecture designed to bring local speakers to campus to talk about regional and systematic topics, and also organized the Darhula Walker Memorial Map Library, consisting of approximately 200 topographic and thematic maps. Although the library is far smaller than the 50,000-map library that the Department of Geography claimed in 1973, it is, nevertheless, a notable achievement for a discipline that appeared to be on the verge of losing its degree programs less than three years earlier.
Despite these modest gains, in 2005 the geography program at West Texas A&M University was not yet truly "healthy," at least not to the extent envisioned for American geography programs by Association of American Geographers President Victoria Lawson in 2004. Like other universities across the United States, West Texas A&M University felt the effects of "enormous budgetary pressures on the public sector," fueled in part by political pressure to reduce taxes, and finds itself in competition with "prisons, transportation, and K-12 schooling" for funding (Lawson 2004, 3). As a misunderstood discipline, geography at West Texas A&M University has been particularly vulnerable to these pressures, as a result of which it is one of the few geography program in Texas that has not developed a program in cartography, remote sensing, or Geographic Information Systems. This fact has been to the detriment of geography majors, particularly as the demand for geographers with GIS skills has increased over the last several years (Gewin 2004).

To address this problem, in November 2004 a subcommittee of the Department of History, Political Science, and Criminal Justice submitted its final report regarding the department’s personnel needs. This committee found that geography's average class size of more than thirty students, its inability to offer a significant variety or number of classes to its majors, and the lack of cartography and Geographic Information Systems offerings require that a second geographer—one with GIS, cartography, and/or planning experience—be hired in the near future (Roper et al 2004).

Conclusion

This history of geography at West Texas A&M University may mirror those of other small geography programs at teachers' colleges in the United States. The program's history has been influenced by paradigm shifts at the national and international levels, but also has been affected by economic and political conditions, enrollment fluctuations, unstable leadership, problems in faculty retention, and a general lack of understanding about the discipline among administrators. These conditions have harmed the program, stunting its growth and curricular development so that today, it likely ranks among the weakest geography programs in Texas.

That geography continues to survive at West Texas A&M University at all is a testament to two factors. First, administrators seem to have understood that whatever geography might be, it is important to other programs, particularly to the education program upon which the institution was founded. Even more significant have been the geographers who have served on the school's faculty since 1920. Their abilities to adapt to changing conditions permitted geography to survive and, at times, even flourish.

Today, however, the geography program remains in a period of instability. Perhaps exposing a hazard inherent to stand-alone geography programs, I abruptly announced my resignation from West Texas A&M University in April 2005, again leaving the institution without a geographer. My decision had nothing to do with the rigors of being a stand-alone geographer; I actually left for another stand-alone position at Castleton State College in Vermont. Like Paul Sando before me, I chose to leave West Texas A&M University to be closer to family and to home.

How my departure will affect the school's geography program remains to be seen. Resignations of individual faculty members obviously have a much greater affect on stand-alone programs than they do on geography departments, and whether or not the faculty search of 2005-
A second geographer (perhaps) has been hired, and could drive the program's improvement once a new instructor in the subject does exist, and will not help the West Texas A&M University program has yet to be determined. However, geography's growth at the institution between 2002 and 2005 suggests that a demand for
The high-school textbook that Walker co-authored with Harriet Smith, The Geography of Texas (Smith and Walker 1923), is only mildly deterministic in its analysis of human-environment relationships, probably because the book is more descriptive than analytical in its treatment of Texas geography.

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