

Geography B.A./B.S.

Expanded Statement of Institutional Purpose

Institutional Mission Reference

Geography is highlighted in The Mission of the University as a program contributing to the University's role as Virginia's international institution. To support and enhance this role, the program designs curricula and teaches courses that cover the wide range of substantive and technical areas of the discipline, including area studies, human-environment relationships, the global environment, and technical areas of cartography and geographic information systems (GIS). The Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degree programs in Geography offer study of world religions, geographic concepts, and integrative skills for the intellectual and professional preparation of students.

Institutional Goal(s) Supported

Geography contributes to University goals by: 1. Ensuring a high quality curriculum at the undergraduate level. 2. Ensuring high quality teaching effectiveness. 3. Promoting the discovery of new knowledge by an active research agenda. 4. Enhancing international and geographic perspectives and the University's international mission. 5. Adding to the diversity and enrichment of the academic community. 6. Providing integrative skills in computer technology in social and environmental sciences (e.g., GIS courses). 7. Providing substantial and diverse student learning outside the classroom. The Geography Program also contributes to Strategic Initiatives by: 1. Ensuring high quality, distinct, and rigorous undergraduate programs. 2. Enhancing diverse graduate programs in areas of geographic information systems (GIS) technology. 3. Enhancing the University's international education. 4. Supporting first-year graduate courses offered in BAIS/MAIS/GPIS programs. 5. Supporting area studies minors (Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East).

Intended Educational (Student) Outcomes, Methods for Assessment, Criteria for Success, Assessment Results, and Use of Results

Intended Outcome 1

Students will gain a foundation of geographic concepts of human organization, cultural differentiation, and human-environment interactions.

Method for Assessing Outcome 1 and Criterion for Success: A senior capstone paper is required for graduation. This paper is reviewed for satisfactory quality by a panel of faculty members. The criteria include 1. conceptual understanding of subject, 2. analytical and critical thinking, 3. writing style and effectiveness, 4. presentation, and 5. use of source materials.

Summary of Assessment Data Collected for Outcome 1: Capstone papers were collected as required for graduation. All papers submitted for December 2002-May 2003 graduation were reviewed. The papers were individually scored. If necessary, papers not meeting minimum criteria were returned with indications of deficiencies and requirements. Accepted papers were pooled for statistical means for each criteria and overall.

Use of Assessment Results from Intended Outcome 1 to Improve Academic Program: The prior assessment report resulted in our program implementing changes to the capstone requirements and acceptance procedures. Students were clearly more aware of the paper requirements and attentive to timely submission. Overall, it can be surmised that geography assessment papers were of a higher level than the immediate assessment period. The template used for defining "research" and need for individual evaluation still poses a challenge to assessment, since many of the program's upper-division courses emphasize group work or papers that do not conform to the stricter capstone paper. This dynamic, however, has been improved by advising students early of research paper requirements, procedures, and the need to take courses in proper sequence to improve their cumulative knowledge and skills.

Intended Outcome 2

Students will gain functional skills in methods of research, including research design, statistics, mapping, and critical thinking.

Method for Assessing Outcome 2 and Criterion for Success: A senior capstone paper is required for graduation and will be reviewed annual for satisfactory quality by a panel of three faculty members.

Summary of Assessment Data Collected, Alternate Method for Outcome 2: The analytical and critical thinking scores of capstone papers were used to assess this outcome.

Use of Assessment Results from Intended Outcome 2 to Improve Academic Program: Capstone papers submitted by geography majors tended to include a handful of graphics, tables, and statistical tabulations. These were important contributions to the analytical and critical thinking of the research paper. The inclusion of cartographic data (maps) and related tabulations also indicated a positive improvement in this metric. This trend will be encouraged to continue while still adhering to the overall requirements of capstone papers.

Intended Outcome 3

Students will gain a foundation of skills in computer technology applications in geographic information sciences (cartography, desktop mapping, remote sensing, or geographic information systems).

Method for Assessing Outcome 3 and Criterion for Success: A senior capstone paper is required for graduation and will be reviewed annual for satisfactory quality by a panel of three faculty members. Success is demonstrated by inclusion of technology in methods and research topics.

Summary of Assessment Data Collected for Outcome 3: Five capstone papers were submitted for graduating seniors. While only half showed an integration of technology topics and methods, this is comparable to recent years.

Use of Assessment Results from Intended Outcome 3 to Improve Academic Program: The integration of computer technology and skills beyond word processing and the literature and Internet search will be further encouraged. This is particularly relevant to our Research Design course (GEOG 308). The limits imposed by 3-credit hour courses are a real impediment to advanced application of technology. Students will be encouraged to enroll in Independent Research following their upper-level coursework, or in their senior year, so that they may have more opportunity to apply their skills toward a larger research problem. This procedures is short of requiring majors to complete a Senior Thesis, but should improve their substantive skills and also overall achievement in subsequent assessments.

Intended Outcome 4

Students will develop effective oral communication skills.

Method for Assessing Outcome 4 and Criterion for Success: All students will give a 30-minute oral presentation of their research or a series of 15- to 20-minute presentations in seminar "writing-intensive" courses. These presentations of research designs, projects, or reviews will be delivered to the class audience for evaluation and factored into the respective course grade. On alternate years, a sample of these presentations will be videotaped for review by a panel of three faculty members

Alternate Method for Assessing Outcome 4 and Criterion for Success: It became impractical to schedule videotaping of presentations, but faculty have been invited to attend student presentations in upper-division courses. Then, feedback is shared and discussed among the program faculty in conference.

Summary of Assessment Data Collected, Alternate Method for Outcome 4: Assessment of oral presentation quality is provided for in the classroom observation and grading by individual faculty. Scores on presentation quality, materials, and primarily delivery skills are factored into each course. Each graduating senior is required to have completed and satisfactorily presented a research presentation.

Use of Assessment Results from Intended Outcome 4 to Improve Academic Program: High quality presentations often incorporate graphics used to satisfy technology and analytical thinking. The seminar format was adopted for two courses by the director of the program. In addition, a spring-time seminar was scheduled (but later did not meet enrollment.) This grading of presentations and the procedure to open presentations to other students and faculty remains.

Intended Outcome 5

Students will develop effective written communication skills.

Method for Assessing Outcome 5 and Criterion for Success: A senior capstone paper is required for graduation and will be reviewed annual for satisfactory quality by a panel of three faculty members. If student passes the requirements, they are allowed to graduate.

Summary of Assessment Data Collected for Outcome 5: Course grades for writing-intensive classes reflect a majority percentage of the grade being derived from writing assignments. Presently, students have gravitated away from these courses, but larger enrollments were gained in the GEOG 422W Coastal Geography in fall 2003. Assessment data for this course includes grades on individual written assignments (practicals), essay exams, and field trip reports.

Use of Assessment Results from Intended Outcome 5 to Improve Academic Program: Overall quality of the written materials in the focus class was high in comparison to capstone papers. There remains a tendency to be uncritical of source materials (e.g., Internet citations of non-peer-reviewed articles or websites). However, analytical and critical thinking demonstrated were high quality and extensively augmented by technology, graphics, and statistics.