AAG Award for Excellence Criteria: Department of Geography, SUNY Geneseo

The MSDAAG Executive Board is pleased to nominate the State University of New York at Geneseo (SUNY Geneseo) for the 2018 AAG Award for Bachelors Program Excellence. The department, established in 1965, offers the BA and a minor in Geography, as well as minors in Environmental Studies and Urban Studies. Here are the program's major strengths in brief, following the AAG’s criteria (Criteria 9-13 are addressed under other criteria in the list):

1. Compelling vision, strong leadership, and shared, democratic governance
The Department’s mission statement—which calls for strong teaching, disciplinary breadth, and geographic literacy—emphasizes preparation of majors for graduate study and professional careers. The Department’s Constitution establishes guidelines and procedures for orderly and democratic governance, including requirements and rules for departmental decision-making and faculty committee assignments, budgeting policy, and regular department meetings. Written guidelines lay out expectations for tenure and promotion; teaching peer-review; five-year program review; annual assessment; distribution of travel money and merit pay; and alcohol and drug use.

Effective governance and coordinated decision-making is evidenced by recent successes in faculty hiring, faculty tenure and promotion, chairperson transitioning, and curriculum revision. As an example, a deliberative, democratic process led to authorization for a new geospatial technology line, with a hire in 2017—a notable achievement given a policy of “replacement only” hiring across the Geneseo campus.

2. Excellence in instruction, student mentorship, and pedagogical innovation
A diverse array of courses is offered, ranging across physical, human, cultural, and historical geography; GIS and cartography; and quantitative methods. The department is a campus leader in delivering general education coursework, service coursework, and study abroad courses—in Argentina, Ghana, Puerto Rico, and Western Canada. Geography also is a campus leader in establishing new community partnerships, spearheading a satellite campus and instructional program in Red Hook, Brooklyn and a formal university partnership with Letchworth State Park—for which a geography faculty member secured nearly $200,000 for technology, equipment, interns, transportation, and a sponsored professorship. Also, since 2015, 24 students have completed internships with 10 different entities representing the college, as well as urban and regional planning, state, and non-profit organizations. Annually, the Department employs eight teaching assistants to support physical geography and GIS laboratory instruction.

The department is home to the Eta Gamma chapter of Gamma Theta Upsilon, and grants five awards and a scholarship annually. Many students are active members of the AAG, as well as state and regional professional organizations. The Department continues to innovate pedagogical experiences, and has run a project for seven years that pairs geography majors with seventh graders to learn about biogeography and GIS. Field Biogeography students participate in a collaboration with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation—and, in 2016, the department collaborated with the Campus Living Department to develop and deliver a “Letchworth Experience” incoming freshmen course that is based in nearby Letchworth State Park.

3. Advancement in the development of curriculum, degree programs, and student learning.
The Department has tripled its number of majors over the last decade and it currently has 105 (spring 2017). The Department also coordinates and supports minor degree programs in Geography, Environmental Studies, and Urban Studies, as well as an Education Concentration in Geography. Collectively, these minor programs serve approximately 140 students. These numbers place the program among the larger undergraduate Geography programs in the nation.

The Department is committed to ongoing curriculum revision. For example, introductory GIS was recently revised to make it accessible to non-majors—and approximately 30% of students enrolled in the course now come from disciplines outside Geography. The curriculum also recently expanded from one senior seminar choice to three, and new courses including Environment and Sustainable Development in Puerto Rico (study abroad), Environmental Stewardship (service course), Geography of Food, and Letchworth Freshmen Experience (a field course) have been developed.

4. Successful student placement with employers, graduate school, or other opportunities
The Department has a strong record of placing graduates in professional fields including planning, environmental and agricultural sciences, land conservation, and geospatial technology. Between 30 and 40% of the department’s graduates pursue advanced degrees within three years of graduation. Many pursue PhDs—at such institutions as Pennsylvania State University, Syracuse University, and the Universities of Washington, Minnesota, West Virginia, Utah, Montana, and North Carolina. As already noted, students intern with a wide variety of public and private organizations.
5. Collegial environment characterized by sociability and mutual respect among faculty, staff, and students
Geneseo Geography has a campus-wide reputation for faculty—as well as student-faculty—collegiality. This reputation is vital to the Department’s role as a “discovery major” and to its recent growth. The department hosts a number of academic and social events each year, including the “Geofest” at the Syracuse Geography Department, where students learn more about the graduate school experience. The Department also supports student organizations that are active on campus and in the surrounding communities. Students and faculty typically attend academic conferences together.

6. Promotion of diversity, intercultural understanding, and participation of underrepresented groups
The Department strives to create an inclusive community and considerable gender and ethnic diversity exists within the faculty and student bodies. In the 2013-14 academic year (the most recent year for which data are available) approximately 35 percent of Geography majors were women and 15 percent self-identified as members of underrepresented minorities. The Geography faculty is comprised of three females and five males, including two non-US citizens. The Department does not have a formal diversity recruitment policy, as student recruitment takes place primarily through introductory general education courses.

7. Pursuit of scholarship, intellectual curiosity, and the exchange of ideas through publication, conference participation, and other means
The Department generously supports professional and academic conference travel and faculty regularly present at one or more conferences each year, including the AAG national meeting, Middle States AAG meeting, ESRI meeting, Geographic Information Sharing Specialty Interest Group (GIS/SIG), NY State GeoCon, NY Geospatial Summit, and Pioneer America Society, among others. Students are active in conference participation; in 2015 students gave 93 presentations at professional and academic venues, including 38 at GREAT Day (a college-wide exposition); 19 at the AAG national meeting; 18 at the Middle States AAG regional meeting; and the balance at other venues including AASHE, COPLAC, GISIG, and SURC. Geography faculty have published two book manuscripts for university presses (Syracuse and Colorado), and have published peer-reviewed work in edited books and leading journals. Faculty also actively share their intellectual expertise with the public, and have recently delivered public presentations for the Association for the Preservation of Geneseo, Genesee Valley Conservancy, Livingston County Historical Society, Army Corps of Engineers, and Letchworth State Park.

8. Active participation in the broader discipline and in regional and national organizations
Faculty regularly participate at the AAG national meeting by presenting research, facilitating student presentations, organizing sessions, and serving as panelists. Faculty are also active in the Middle States AAG, and regularly bring a large group of student presenters. A faculty member is the current president of Middle States, and SUNY Geneseo will host the annual meeting in October 2017. Faculty are also involved with the Genesee Valley Conservancy (GVC), a regional land trust, with two faculty sitting on the board and serving on and chairing committees.

In 2015, the Department was one of four units selected to move into a new building on the Geneseo campus that contains state-of-the-art physical geography and GIS labs and other instructional spaces. The Department has a healthy foundation account exceeding $40,000, and an engaged alumni community. The Department annually spends approximately $3,000 from its foundation account, primarily in support of field instruction and student awards. The Department maintains an active Facebook community—Alumni Geographers of Geneseo—which is a venue to post job openings, network, share news, and communicate events. In 2017, two Department faculty members were awarded a $232,000 collaborative research grant from the Geography and Spatial Sciences division of the NSF. In partnership with a colleague at the University of Buffalo, the grant (NSF award number 1660388) is a Research at Undergraduate Institutions (RUI) award that employs nine undergraduate RAs over the three-year course of the grant.

In sum, SUNY Geneseo Geography is an outstanding department that is dedicated to effective teaching, scholarship, and community service. It is a vital part of an institution that is widely recognized as one of the country’s premier public liberal arts institutions. The Department has agreed to this nomination and is able to provide additional documentation for each item addressed above.

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