2010-2011 Graduate Opportunity Program Research Assistantship Application

Departmental Diversity Plan Narrative

Geographers explore the rich diversity of physical and human-land landscapes; we seek to document and explore the various ways in which life differs across place. Geography is by its very nature committed to the diversity of humans in terms of such social axes as ethnicity, “race”, gender, class, caste, sexuality, and disability. Promoting, nurturing, and expanding diversity in the UW Geography Department is central to our intellectual and pedagogic missions. We cannot “do” geography without diversity. We are a small department (16 faculty, 2 jointly appointed) with a large graduate program (58 students), funded by TAships in a small (and historically white-male) discipline in the US academy. We have long been ranked as a “top 10” department among the 69 US doctoral granting geography units. Our reputation is based significantly on research that investigates practices and structures of social inequality. We are a leader in research and teaching on ethnic and racial geographies, gender and feminist geographies, and urban geographies. A collegial department, we practice open and consensus-based democratic decision making. We respect and support one another despite epistemological, methodological, or topical differences and disagreements. We take seriously the need to model this collegiality to our graduate students as part of their professional development. Our diversity plan evolves from these commitments.

Departmental Efforts to Recruit Minority and Underrepresented Students, Present and Future. Our current efforts to recruit underrepresented graduate students are both implicit and explicit. To a large degree, we regularly attract underrepresented graduate students simply by virtue of who we are as a geography department. Thirty-two percent of our faculty are women; 13 are international students; five are members of unrepresented minorities, four are the first members of their families to attend university; and four are openly gay or lesbian. Many current students tell us our diversity (relative to peer institutions) was critical to their choosing UW. Beyond this, we are widely known for critical research on topics such as ethnicity, “race”, gender, class, caste, sexuality, and disability. The list of such work is too long to outline here, but representative samples include: Prof. Lawson and Jarosz examine race and poverty in the U.S., UK and Europe. With respect to GOP’s specific targeted populations, most of our faculty is engaged in research with or about minority and disadvantaged groups. The list of such work is too long to outline here, but representative samples include: Prof. Lawson and Jarosz examine race and poverty in the restructuring of the rural western US; Prof. Ellis researches the residential decision-making of mixed-race couples; Prof. Mitchell studies ethnic migration in multiple countries; Prof. England’s researches home-care workers, many of whom are poor women of color; Prof. Herbert examines current practices of urban banishment, targeted primarily at homeless people of color; and Prof. Brown examines the history of gay spaces in Seattle. Our experience and interviews with former/current GOP students makes clear that many are interested in pursuing these topics with relevant faculty; the very presence of active research on these topics is a powerful and unequivocal signal to them that we are a welcoming and supportive department for underrepresented students.

Our efforts to recruit a diverse graduate student body occur through more explicit means, as well. Our Departmental Diversity Committee is chaired by Victoria Lawson who also serves on the national Association of American Geographers Diversity Committee. This active committee includes three graduate students, two of whom are prior GOP-RA recipients and the other also an underrepresented student. The DC has been developing diversity plans for all aspects of the department’s work. We also ensure that our graduate students are aware of diverse...
career paths, both inside and outside the academy. Specifically, we offer graduate coursework in high-demand fields, such as our emphasis on GIS, urban geography, and spatial analytics and other methodologies. Finally, we actively disseminate and follow through on our commitments to diversity. Our webpage makes plain the research and teaching commitments elaborated above. Once students apply to the graduate program, we pay special attention to statements that indicate any social or educational disadvantages, and we use this information to help achieve diversity in our applicant pool and in our admission decisions. Our Graduate Program Coordinator identifies potential GOP candidates early in the process, and, along with the Department Chair and Diversity Committee Chair, communicates with them early in the application and recruitment process.

Department Efforts to Increase Yield. We employ a range of methods to ensure that we can attract students once they are admitted. We do all that we can to make sure that potential graduate students are aware of life in our department, and of our commitments outlined above. We pay travel expenses for a department visit for all of our top recruits, including potential GOP recipients. During the visit, we ensure close communication between potential recruits and current students. We make special use of diversity committee members, some of whom are active with GOMAP more broadly. We make sure that students spend significant time with faculty members with similar research interests, and we ask those faculty to remain in close contact with prospective students after the visit.

Our success in recruiting has historically benefited tremendously from GOP support. We are resource poor as a department because we are not consistently “grant-heavy.” This poverty stands in direct uncompetitive contrast to our peer schools’ multiple recruitment (work-free) fellowships: Berkeley, UCLA, Clark, UBC, Minnesota, Penn State, Colorado, and Arizona, typically. GOP provides one of the only sources of non-TA funding we can offer students and this type of support is crucial for effective recruitment and retention. Our evidence shows that if we lost under-represented students in the past, it was usually because they received better financial packages from elsewhere.

Retention Efforts. Luckily, we retain those underrepresented students we are lucky enough to recruit. This is likely due to the culture and research topics of our department, as outlined above. Our retention successes also come from our “soft-touch” approach, carried out in an organized and systematic manner. Faculty who teach core courses, potential supervisors and committee members, the Chair, the GPC, and the Assistant to the Chair each make a coordinated effort to reach out to these students to check and see how they are doing in the first year. We have a Spring Review of all graduate students where difficulties or obstacles to student progress are raised to the entire faculty and specific strategies are proposed to address them. We have tightened up our policies and practices around moving students from M.A. to the Ph.D. We now require supervisory committees to work explicitly with students to prepare them for doctoral work. We run full-quarter professional development seminars on external-grant funding, publishing in academia, and teaching to create a department where students can stay and succeed.

Department Efforts at Inclusion. Given the above, we are reasonably confident that students do not feel excluded from the life of our department. Our spirit of inclusiveness is certainly enhanced by our colloquia series, where top international scholars, UW faculty, and advanced graduate students present their research to the entire departmental community. Significantly, three of the five members of the colloquia committee are graduate students. We are now in our second year with a Graduate Policy Committee, one that includes a student representative. This provides an official forum for students to express concerns or to suggest improvements, and works as a further and continual check to ensure that the graduate community.

Comment [JA10]: Reflects Strategy 3: Inclusion: Show sustained engaged efforts to promote inclusion and equity. Outcome 1.1: To increase presence of underrepresented groups in program and department.

Comment [JA11]: Reflects Strategy 9: Include courses in the program’s curriculum to attract underrepresented students’ interest. Outcome 1.2: To promote the academic success of underrepresented students within the program/department.

Comment [JA12]: Reflects Strategy 6: Hold department-specific specialized recruitment events, fairs, career conferences, etc. for prospective underrepresented students. Outcome 2.1: To increase the presence of underrepresented student populations.

Comment [JA13]: Reflects Strategy 22: Provide mentoring or leadership training for women or underrepresented students. Outcome 2.2: To improve departmental climate for students, faculty, and staff belonging to underrepresented groups.

Comment [JA14]: Reflects Strategy 22: Provide mentoring or leadership training for women or underrepresented students. Outcome 2.3: To increase the presence of underrepresented students within the program/department.
is vibrant and welcoming. The department funds two weekly social events open to everyone: a reception for the colloquium speaker immediately after their talk on Friday afternoons, and a Monday morning “coffee break” for all members of the department to informally chat with one another. We publicize our research on and support of diversity issues through highly visible posters and displays in the main public spaces of the department.

If there are lines of division within our graduate community, those are likely due to divergences in personality types and research interests. The former are inevitable and for the students to negotiate. The latter is of greater concern. We have done two things this academic year to address it. One was to host the first annual PhD Dissertators retreat. We joined forces with the Department of Geography at UBC for this event, held at the Friday Harbor Laboratories. Seven UW students joined 11 of their UBC counterparts, along with four faculty (two from each department) for a long weekend focused on research design. [Of the seven UW students at the retreat, two are former GOP-RA recipients, one is the first in her family to attend college, and two are international students.] The enterprise was centered on small group sessions in which students discussed their particular research project. Because the students were required to engage each other constructively, they were forced to talk across differences in method and theoretical approach, in a way that all of them said was immensely helpful.

A second new development is the creation of a required research design course. Just as with the retreat, students in this course will be asked to read and assess each other’s work in a supportive and helpful fashion. This, too, will enhance a healthy respect for methodological and theoretical differences, and work to decrease any degree of possible marginalization along these lines.

Future Funding of GOP Recipients. We ensure that all of our GOP recipients receive sufficient additional funding to complete their graduate work. Students typically receive two-year funding offers for the MA and three-year offers for the PhD. GOP awardees are also promised these packages. Graduate students are additionally supported with internal funds for research expenses and for presenting their research at one conference per year. We are very active in identifying additional sources of funding in CSDE, the Jackson School, the Law, Societies, and Justice Program, the Integrated Writing Project program and Department of Education language grants. In addition, those students who engage in fieldwork for their research are closely mentored and guided in their grant proposal writing efforts. This guidance is provided both through a graduate course dedicated to proposal writing, and also through close advising with doctoral supervisors and other committee members. Through the considered deployment of these resources – both financial and extra-financial – our students make steady progress toward their degrees and succeed admirably well in their post-degree careers.