

# Final Assessment Report for the 2022-2023 Cyclical Review of the of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies Undergraduate Programs

## INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Laurier's Institutional Quality Assurance Procedures ([Policy 2.1](#)), this Final Assessment Report provides a summary of the cyclical program review process for the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies undergraduate programs, prepared by the Quality Assurance Office, along with an identification of strengths of the program(s) under review authored by the Dean of the Faculty of Science. All recommendations made by the external review committee in their report are listed, followed by a summary of the department's response, and the decanal response. Recommendations prioritized are listed in the Implementation Plan, with those not being prioritized for implementation noted as well.

The Final Assessment Report is reviewed and approved by the Provost and Vice-President: Academic. Following completion of the Final Assessment Report, it is approved by the Program Review Sub-Committee and Senate Academic Planning Committee. Approval dates are listed at the end of this report. Final Assessment Reports are submitted to Senate as part of an annual report on cyclical reviews, and to the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance for information. Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Reports are posted on the public-facing page of the [Quality Assurance Office](#) website.

The Implementation Plan for the recommendations prioritized in the Final Assessment Report can be found at the end of this report. Units will submit their first Implementation Report two years following approval of the Final Assessment Report at Senate. The Implementation Report will include comments from the unit on actions taken toward the completion of recommendations, comments from the relevant Dean(s) related to the progress made, and comments from the Program Review Sub-Committee, which is responsible for approving the Implementation Report and deciding if further reports are required. The Implementation Report is submitted to the Senate Academic Planning Committee for information.

## SUMMARY OF REVIEW PROCESS

The last cyclical program review of the undergraduate programs within the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies took place in 2014-2015. The graduate programs offered by the Department are run jointly with the University of Waterloo (UW) and were reviewed in a separate process led by UW.

Self-Study authorship was led by Dr. Mary-Louise Byrne, Chair of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, with the document including contributions from many full-time faculty and staff members. The Self-Study notes that three Department-in-Council meetings were held that focused on the creation of the document, and a special meeting held to discuss and revise the final document. The Self-Study also notes that students were invited to provide feedback on the Self-Study through participation in the Department-in-Council. In addition to the Self-Study (Volume I), the Department also submitted a copy of faculty curricula vita (Volume II), a volume of course syllabi, and a list of proposed external reviewers (Volume III). A draft of the Self-Study was reviewed by the Quality Assurance Office and the Dean of the Faculty of Science prior to submission of the final version.

Following Laurier's IQAP, the external review committee for the review consisted of two external reviewers from outside the university, and one internal reviewer from Laurier but outside of the unit. The review committee was selected by the Program Review Sub-Committee on November 4, 2022, and a virtual external review took place between January 16<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

The review committee consisted of **Dr. Ken Maly** from the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at Wilfrid Laurier, **Dr. Ben Bradshaw** from the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics at the University of Guelph, and **Dr. Tracy Brennand** from the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University. During the external review, the committee had virtual meetings with the following individuals and groups:

- Dr. Heidi Northwood, Interim Provost and Vice-President: Academic, and Dr. Mary Wilson, Vice-Provost: Teaching and Learning
- Dr. Anthony Clarke, Dean of the Faculty of Science
- Dr. Mary-Louise Byrne, Chair of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies
- Department of Geography and Environmental Studies Full-Time Faculty
- Undergraduate students from the Geography and Environmental Studies programs
- Geography and Environmental Studies Instructional and Administrative Staff
- Geography and Environmental Studies Technical Staff
- Ms. Charlotte Innerd, Head of Collections and Acquisitions, and Mr. Peter Genzinger, Liaison Librarian
- Ms. Sally Heath, Manager: Academic Program Development and Review and Ms. Jessica Blondin, Executive Assistant

The review committee submitted their completed report on May 16, 2023. The executive summary from the report, and its recommendations, are provided below.

## External Reviewers' Report Executive Summary

The Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Laurier has an outstanding research presence and is working hard to deliver its existing curriculum, including via innovative pedagogy. At the same time, it appears lacking in a collaborative strategic vision for the department that could guide strategic hires and generate an updated, forward-looking undergraduate curriculum that leverages the strong research faculty. It is vital that the Department comes together as a collective to imagine this strategic vision.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES

The External Reviewers' Report included 14 recommendations to improve the quality of the Geography and Environmental Studies undergraduate programs. All recommendations have been listed verbatim below, followed by a summary of the department's response, and the decanal response.

**Recommendation #1:** Develop and publish Program Learning Outcomes for just those programs that ultimately will be delivered by the Department in the years to come.

**Unit Response:** This is a relevant recommendation since we reviewed learning outcomes some time ago. Along with a careful review and renewal of our current curriculum, we need to map learning outcomes more. We note that some departments have formal Program Learning Outcomes in their student facing webpages: <https://students.wlu.ca/programs>. We will look at how to include this on our web pages as we attend to curriculum renewal.

**Decanal Response:** I support the plan of the Department to review and renew their curricula with attention to learning outcomes and encourage them to make the latter more visible to both prospective and current students.

**Recommendation #2:** Collectively, develop a bold vision for the Department's future based on research synergies that align with WLU's and the Faculty of Science's visions. Leverage that vision to develop an aspirational faculty renewal plan.

**Unit Response:** We agree with this recommendation. We committed to a fall visioning meeting as minuted in our June Department in Council meeting. Based on this meeting, we will develop a strategic plan for the department that connects with the university and Faculty of Science vision.

**Decanal Response:** Given both the strength of the faculty members as scholars and their opportunities to make significant contributions to both the Academic and Research strategic plans, I strongly encourage the Department to address this recommendation, understanding the time and effort it will take in light of their extensive "regular" activities.

**Recommendation #3:** With support from an Office of Teaching and Learning, initiate a collective exercise to envision a more intentional curriculum plan that plays to faculty strengths and complement (including the faculty renewal plan).

**Unit Response:** We will act on this recommendation following our fall 2023 visioning meeting, with the goal of undertaking a curriculum review of our existing programs by the end of 2024. We will develop this together with a faculty renewal plan that supports our curriculum plan.

**Decanal Response:** The Department is strongly encouraged to follow through with this recommendation.

**Recommendation #4:** A more deliberate approach to decolonizing courses and considering EDI should be considered during curricula revision.

**Unit Response:** We recognise the significance of decolonizing geography and environmental studies, and the need to embed principles of EDI in our courses. We agree with this recommendation and will discuss making ES371: Indigenous Environmental Knowledges a required course for the Honours BA Environmental Studies degree and the Honours BA Geography, Honours BSc Geography, and Honours BSc Geography and Geomatics degrees. This would require altering the prerequisite for ES371, which is currently ES110, to be 'ES110 or GG102'. We would review this as part of the broader curriculum review. In all cases, the responsibility for this course and decolonization in general cannot fall on the small number of self-identified Indigenous faculty.

**Decanal Response:** As with Recommendation #4, the Department is strongly encouraged to address this recommendation when conducting their broader review of their academic programs.

**Recommendation #5:** Only list courses in the calendar that will be typically taught by continuing faculty.

**Unit Response:** At this time, we do not differentiate courses based on who teaches them, and the increasing dependence of CTF would limit our ability to deliver programs as currently designed if we only listed courses taught by continuing faculty. That said, we have started reviewing the curriculum since Winter 2023 by removing 12 courses that were identified as having not been taught in more than five years and unlikely to be taught in the next few years. Past practice had been to keep courses in the calendar so they could be modified in the future without creating new course numbers. Practice in the Faculty of Science does not require us to keep courses in the calendar, so we will undertake the strategic review of course materials and embrace the potential for renewing and streamlining the curriculum as part of a strategic review.

**Decanal Response:** I agree that this recommendation would be challenging to implement on an annual basis, beyond removing from the Calendar those courses for which there is no plan to deliver in the future.

**Recommendation #6:** Elevate the prominence of the Undergraduate Program Committee in terms of recognition of service, departmental web presence, thoughtful selection of its members, etc. and ask it to take a more active and consistent role in managing program curricula to ensure relevance, efficiency, etc.

**Unit Response:** The Department's Curriculum Committee is comprised of the Undergraduate Officers, the Chair, and at least one additional member. For the 2022-2023 academic year, there was one additional member and the Graduate Officer because of the need to redevelop our graduate program. The composition and recognition of service of the Undergraduate Officer and the committee members is partly determined by our Collective Agreement. We agree that the department can review the mandate and composition of the Curriculum Committee and develop a Curriculum Committee that can play a greater role in developing and implementing curriculum related recommendations.

**Decanal Response:** I support and encourage the Department to review the activity of their curriculum committees.

**Recommendation #7:** Consider implementing an entrance survey.

**Unit Response:** This Recommendation will be passed onto the curriculum committee to consider.

**Decanal Response:** I support and encourage this action.

**Recommendation #8:** Develop and implement a plan to enhance WIL in the curriculum.

**Unit Response:** We have recently started discussions with the Co-operative Education and Workplace Partnership to redevelop co-op undergraduate degrees that would be accredited with Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL). New and revised co-op programs will need to meet these accreditation standards, and this includes a number of on-campus in-person Spring semesters. Additionally, this will help employers access tax credits and government funding for co-op students.

**Decanal Response:** While implementation of this recommendation is encouraged, it is complicated by issues of resourcing (e.g., Co-Op Office) at a time when the University is budgetary challenged. Nonetheless, the Department should review and consider what is truly possible.

**Recommendation #9:** As part of a larger curriculum review, map the assignment of regular faculty to specific courses and assess the effectiveness of these allocations with respect to enrolments, coverage of flagship courses, coverage of core courses, etc.

**Unit Response:** This is a good idea. We will include this recommendation in our fall visioning meeting and take it into consideration as part of our wider curriculum review.

**Decanal Response:** The Department is very strongly encouraged to address this recommendation.

**Recommendation #10:** Track conversion rates of students to GES majors from 100 level courses and use this data in any reassessment of 100 level course delivery.

**Unit Response:** This is a useful recommendation and would provide valuable year-after-year data from Institutional Research and Planning. We will mark this as an annual data request.

**Decanal Response:** The Department is very strongly encouraged to address this recommendation.

**Recommendation #11:** Assess the usage of staff resource relative to the strategic goals of the department and reassign as needed.

**Unit Response:** In response to this recommendation, we would note that any changes to staff resourcing would need to go through the Dean of Science Office and Staff Association.

**Decanal Response:** Indeed, as with all recommendations requiring resourcing, this recommendation will be difficult to address in the current fiscal environment. That said, attention should and will be paid to the most efficient use of all resources, including those of staffing. A current example is the centralization of advising within the Faculty of Science.

**Recommendation #12:** Elevate the roles of the Undergraduate and Graduate Program Officers in departmental governance. Consider introduction of a Strategic Planning Committee.

**Unit Response:** As above in the Response to Recommendation #6, The Department's Curriculum Committee is comprised of the Undergraduate Officers, the Chair, and at least one additional member. For the 2022-2023 academic year, there was one additional member and the Graduate Officer because of the need to redevelop our graduate program. Consideration will be given to making the Graduate Officer a permanent member of this committee. Given the number of full-time faculty members in the department, a Strategic Planning Committee is likely to be filled with many who are on the Curriculum Committee.

**Decanal Response:** Given the provisions within the WLUFA Collective Agreement, this recommendation would be difficult to implement. As such, it has not been prioritized in the Implementation Plan.

**Recommendation #13:** As part of a larger visioning exercise, the department must consider the ways in which research strength, and especially multiple Research Chairs, can contribute most effectively to undergraduate program strength.

**Unit Response:** We agree with this recommendation and will incorporate it into the planned fall visioning meeting.

**Decanal Response:** The Department is very strongly encouraged to address this recommendation.

**Recommendation #14:** Conduct an evidence-based exploration of the reasons for low graduation rates and a reduction in majors and consider these in curriculum revisions.

**Unit Response:** This is a valuable recommendation. We will share this recommendation with Institutional Research and the Dean of Science to see what data is available on student retention and graduation rates. We will also explore how we might be able to connect with students who have left the program in their senior years.

**Decanal Response:** Student retention and graduation is a major issue that both the Faculty and the University at large is committed to addressing. The Department will be supported as we collectively investigate obstacles to the success of our students.

## PROGRAM STRENGTHS

**Dean of the Faculty of Science:** A major strength of the programs delivered by the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies (GES) is the commitment to informative experiential learning opportunities which contributes significantly to the preparation of students in related careers. This is the result of a dedicated and committed faculty complement and reflects their strength as scholars and researchers.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT AND ENHANCEMENT

**Dean of the Faculty of Science:** As recognized by the review committee, the Department has a relatively large complement of research chairs, while many other faculty members are very active and successful scholars. This poses challenges to delivering academic programs. The Department is encouraged to review all that they teach with the aim to find efficiencies while ensuring that the student body at large have the opportunity to engage with all scholars.

## SIGNATURES

Dr. Heidi Northwood

October 16, 2023



## APPROVAL DATES

Approved by Program Review Sub-Committee: December 7, 2023

Approved by Senate Academic Planning Committee: January 11, 2024

Submitted to Senate (for information): April 10, 2024

Implementation Report Due Date: April 10, 2026



## RECOMMENDATIONS PRIORITIZED FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND ACTION PLAN

*The following Implementation Plan was created by the Dean of the Faculty of Science as part of the Decanal Response.*

Recommendation to be Implemented	Responsibility for Implementation	Responsibility for Resourcing (if applicable)	Anticipated Completion Date
<b>Recommendation #1:</b> Develop and publish Program Learning Outcomes for just those programs that ultimately will be delivered by the Department in the years to come.	Department	n/a	Summer 2024
<b>Recommendation #2:</b> Collectively, develop a bold vision for the Department's future based on research synergies that align with WLU's and the Faculty of Science's visions. Leverage that vision to develop an aspirational faculty renewal plan.	Department and Dean	Dean and Provost	Summer 2024
<b>Recommendation #3:</b> With support from an Office of Teaching and Learning, initiate a collective exercise to envision a more intentional curriculum plan that plays to faculty strengths and complement (including the faculty renewal plan).	Department	n/a	Summer 2024
<b>Recommendation #4:</b> A more deliberate approach to decolonizing courses and considering EDI should be considered during curricula revision.	Department	n/a	Summer 2024
<b>Recommendation #5:</b> Only list courses in the calendar that will be typically taught by continuing faculty.	Department	n/a	Summer 2024

<p><b>Recommendation #6:</b> Elevate the prominence of the Undergraduate Program Committee in terms of recognition of service, departmental web presence, thoughtful selection of its members, etc. and ask it to take a more active and consistent role in managing program curricula to ensure relevance, efficiency, etc.</p>	<p>Department</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #7:</b> Consider implementing an entrance survey.</p>	<p>Department/Faculty</p>	<p>Dean</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #8:</b> Develop and implement a plan to enhance WIL in the curriculum.</p>	<p>Department</p>	<p>Dean</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #9:</b> As part of a larger curriculum review, map the assignment of regular faculty to specific courses and assess the effectiveness of these allocations with respect to enrolments, coverage of flagship courses, coverage of core courses, etc.</p>	<p>Department</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #10:</b> Track conversion rates of students to GES majors from 100 level courses and use this data in any reassessment of 100 level course delivery.</p>	<p>Department</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #11:</b> Assess the usage of staff resource relative to the strategic goals of the department and reassign as needed.</p>	<p>Department and Dean</p>	<p>Dean</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #12:</b> Elevate the roles of the Undergraduate and Graduate Program Officers in departmental governance. Consider introduction of a Strategic Planning Committee.</p>	<p><i>This recommendation has not been prioritized.</i></p>		

<p><b>Recommendation #13:</b> As part of a larger visioning exercise, the department must consider the ways in which research strength, and especially multiple Research Chairs, can contribute most effectively to undergraduate program strength.</p>	<p>Department</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation #14:</b> Conduct an evidence-based exploration of the reasons for low graduation rates and a reduction in majors and consider these in curriculum revisions.</p>	<p>Department &amp; Faculty</p>	<p>Dean</p>	<p>Summer 2024</p>