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Development of Geography at the University of Illinois

as presented by Dr. Jerome Fellmann to the Association of American Geographers in 1995

Geography has been an integral part of the University of Illinois since its founding in 1867, taught continuously in one or another of the instructional programs of the school. It wasn't recognized as a degree-earning discipline until the 1920s, however, and only after another quarter-century was geography given independent departmental status.

In proposing 6 departments and 15 courses of instruction, the first University Regents included commercial geography as part of a planned Department of Trade and Commerce. And the 1867 Committee on Courses reported that a Professorship of Geology, Mineralogy and Physical Geography in the Department of General Science and Literature was among the more important chairs of instruction.

Each successive Catalogue of the early University made room for Geography and its subdivisions. At various times, historical geography was included in the Department of History and Science, and physical geography and meteorology appeared as requirements in the schools of Agriculture, Horticulture, Natural History, and Civil Engineering. By 1882, physiography, or 'the study of nature' was taught by illustrated lectures, and beginning in 1898 Teachers and others who desire[d] an introduction to the new geography were offered a 10 hours course in physiography.

As it did at many other American universities around 1900, geography at Illinois underwent a form of split existence. Economic geography appeared as a subject developed and taught within the Department of Economics, while other branches of human geography along with physical and regional geography were housed within Geology.

Economic and commercial geography was first offered at Illinois in 1902, as a highly successful course in the economics program. Initially required of all economics students, it was later demoted to an elective and by 1922 dropped completely as an economics course. It was then taken up, with much reduced enrollment, in the geography program that was newly developing within the Department of Geology.

All subsequent instruction in Geography at Illinois up to the 1940s was tied to Geology in the early years, as a very subordinate interest of that Department. Initially, only two geography courses were scheduled: Physiography and Meteorology. The latter was offered especially for students in Agriculture. By 1904, physiography was specifically identified as an undergraduate Physical Geography course, and by 1905 a Teachers Course in Physical Geography and a graduate Studies in Illinois Geography course were added.

An independent geography program was beginning. The Geology Department recognized that Geography had intellectual interests different from its own, and by 1909 that recognition became formalized. The Department began offering three lines of work one of which was

Physiographic Geology/Physical Geography, an area of specialization designed for students whose interests were more in the earth's surface, the origin of its topographic forms and the influence of its transforming agents on the welfare of plants, animals, and man.

As a measure of their commitment to geography within the department's structure, the purely geological staff in 1911 added a member with strong geography credentials. That was John L. Rich, a new Ph.D. from Cornell where he had taught physical geography from 1909 to 1911 and had already, under the sponsorship of R.S. Tarr, twice presented papers before the AAG. Rich, who subsequently had a most distinguished career as a petroleum geologist was a programmatic whirlwind. Over the next 7 years, he introduced a host of purely Geography offerings, including Regional Geography, Geography of Europe, Geography of North America, Influences of the Geographic Environment, Advanced Physiography, Geography of South and Central America, Principles of Geography, General Geography, Geography and the War, and Human Geography.

When Rich left the department in 1918, the program was far broader and richer than the purely physical geography line existing at his arrival. Incorporating regional, human, and topical approaches, the curriculum he developed represented an appreciation of the breadth of the field and an awareness of the structure it was assuming at other major universities.

But the program did not survive intact with Rich's departure in 1918. His replacement taught only 3 or 4 of his formidable array of courses over the next two years. But Rich had created a momentum that advanced Geography on two vital fronts. First was the creation of a geography major within the Geology Department. Second was the appointment of a professional geographer to give that program guidance.

Both developments date from the start of the 1920s. First, in 1920, the Geology Department split its course offerings between group A, Geology and group B, Geography. The split was not even. The Geography specialization had 8 undergraduate and no graduate courses compared to Geology's 16 and 2. But a recognized major had been established and with the introduction of a Field Geography course, a component of professional research training had been introduced.

Next, the department sought replacement for the leadership of John Rich, and beginning in 1921 it did so. In that year William O. Blanchard, a new Wisconsin Ph.D., joined the staff as the University's first professionally trained geographer and the first geographer to hold professorial rank. His initial title, however, was Assistant Professor of Geology, and until the late 1920s nearly all geography appointees held ranks in Geology. By virtue of his first arrival, his higher rank, and ultimate length of service, Blanchard was recognized as the leader of the Geography group until after World War II.

That group was sizeable and ever changing. Between 1920 and 1934, 19 individuals held faculty positions in the program. Most tenures were short and most ranks were low, though a very few made longer-term professional commitments to Illinois. All were part of a developing instructional program that was well-balanced with appropriate components of regional geography, of the branches of systematic geography then current, and with some training in

geographic techniques. Blanchard's interests in economic geography were early apparent in the course structure, but in 1930, and perhaps earlier, he reminded the staff of the need to maintain a strong physical focus in all course descriptions and content.

Even with changing faculty, the geography curriculum remained relatively constant and limited up to 1934 even as enrollment ballooned. Geography had 250 enrollees in 1920, 800 in 1933, and over 1200 in 1934 when Elements of Geography was added as a science course acceptable for College of Commerce students.

An increasing number of graduate majors were outgrowths of the ever-larger introductory courses. The first two Master's degrees with Geography specialization were awarded in 1926 and another 14 were granted by the end of 1933. The degrees were officially given in Geology, although some recipients took no work in that discipline. Indeed, during those years only one Master's thesis was written on a physical geographic topic and that was related to climate, not geology.

There was at least some expression of discontent within the geography faculty at what they felt to be unfair distributions of labor and reward within the Geology Department. In 1931, for example, the Geography staff of five was teaching the same number of students as was the Geology staff of fourteen. The Geographers already had, in 1930, sent a message to the Department Head noting the increasing academic drift apart of the department's two components. Since, they noted, their tie with Geology was only a relic of history, they asked for separation and the creation of their own new department. A committee appointed by the Dean to look into the request reported back favorably, but budget constraints and, presumably, more pressing matters delayed departmental separation for another 15 years.

But a lesser degree of independence was forthcoming. In 1934, the Department of Geology became officially the Department of Geology and Geography. For the first time, all Geographers were officially recognized as such by appointment title, though the Headship of the combined department, and therefore budgetary control, was retained by Geology.

Although Geography's status was new, its curriculum remained largely unchanged from that established during the 1920s. Very minor additions and adjustments were made in the regional geography offerings during the 1930s, and a Map and Aerial Photographs Interpretation course was added in 1942 to accommodate students in the enlisted reserve program. Graduate student enrollments, however, expanded. Even with the disruption of the wartime period, 26 Masters' degrees were awarded between 1934 and 1945. If thesis titles can serve as a guide, one can conclude that the geography orientation was distinctly non-physical and heavily influenced by Blanchard's economic geography interests. Only 3 titles dealt with physical geography, and 2 of those were climate related.

Following the war, civilian student enrollment in geography climbed from about 200 in 1943 to nearly 1400 by 1946. The Geography Division was in program and personnel poorly prepared to cope with that increase. But the first necessary steps toward the creation of a stronger separate

Department of Geography were being taken. The Dean in 1943 and the College Executive Committee in 1944 favored creation of the new department. By 1945 it was formed.

An immediate search for a departmental Head was launched. Numerous prominent geographers were contacted, several were interviewed, and ultimately Joseph A. Russell, a Michigan Ph.D. and later (1954) a President of the AAG, was offered and accepted the position, beginning in Spring of 1949.

Russell had the task of developing the Urbana-Champaign geography program, claiming and expanding its office and classroom space, increasing its budget, strengthening the library collection, and hiring new staff. He was charged by the Dean to continue strong undergraduate work in geography and to recruit staff and develop facilities to create an outstanding graduate department. Building on the undergraduate course structure already in place, a structure of breadth in systematic and regional geography, Russell concentrated on enhancing the graduate program as his primary charge, though an emphasis on applied economic geography reflected his own personal research interests.

Quite independently, a separate geography instructional program was incorporated in the new Chicago branch of the University established after the war.

Although each of Russell's successors sought to move departmental programs in directions they thought important to its curriculum and research environment, each as well sought faculty consensus on those directions. Under each, staff discussion reached agreement on a limited range of undergraduate and graduate instructional emphases and themes around which to structure course offerings and degree paths. Those emphases and programs inevitably changed over the years to reflect the changing teaching and research interests of a staff steadily renewed and invigorated by new personnel as well as to reflect changing currents in geography at large.

Over the years, the department has fared well in periodic national assessments ranked in the group just below the top 10 in a 1966 study and near the middle of the top 10 in ratings from the early and late 1980s. Whether or not such rankings deserve credence, they can at least charitably be taken as presumed evidence of the quality and professional acceptance of Geography at the University of Illinois.