

Geography and Geology Department position paper on the proposed merger of the Department of Geography and Geology with the Department of Physics and Physical Oceanography

The Department of Geography and Geology strongly opposes the proposed and unsought plan to merge it with the Department of Physics and Physical Oceanography. We believe this merger will have wide ranging and far reaching negative impacts on students, faculty, staff and programs within each department and potentially across the university for many years to come. Our specific concerns are summarized below.

- 1) **Disparate nature of the disciplines and no national precedent** -- The combination of a physics department and a geography and geology department is unprecedented at any comparatively sized, comprehensive university in the United States. Occasionally, geology programs include a large geophysics component, but only where programmatic emphasis is on solid earth geophysics or atmospheric dynamics. However, neither department in the proposed merger at UNCW has the existing focus areas in these subdisciplines. Based on our research, in all cases where a geology program contains geophysics or atmospheric dynamics components, a separate physics department also exists. The reason that physics departments are never combined with geography and geology departments is that they typically *share almost no common curricula, pedagogy and philosophy* other than that they are both sciences. This dichotomy is even stronger at UNCW where the current curricula, pedagogy, and research in the Department of Physics and Physical Oceanography are largely lab-based and theoretical, whereas the curricula, pedagogy, and research in the Department of Geography and Geology are field-based and applied. Furthermore, geography programs typically include a significant social science component. No academic department anywhere in the United States combines geography and physics. Attempting to meld disciplines with such disparate subject matter, methods and philosophies is a recipe for disaster that can only weaken both units and hurt the overall instructional and scholarly efforts of both. Geography is about people and places, and combines social and physical sciences. Combining geography with physics is the equivalent of combining anthropology and physics, or sociology and physics, and in our opinion completely illogical.
- 2) **Nullification of current efforts to raise the profile of the department** -- The proposed merger runs completely contrary to our long-range plans and recent efforts to create a coherent, functioning department. It will stall or reverse the gains we have made in revamping curricula, increasing majors, and making new faculty hires. We have come a long way towards rallying around common strengths and areas of overlap between geography and geology. These innovations include adding the new Geosciences BA program, the new Oceanography BS program, and the graduate certificate in GIS, as well as making recent hires that will serve multiple program areas in the department. Now, instead of consolidating those gains, we are being asked to incorporate yet another very disparate discipline and share resources with a unit with which we have very few curricular connections. Long-range planning for such a conglomeration would be inconceivable. Assessment for a combined department with these disciplines is another issue in which no common ground exists between the disciplines. To date no specific guidance has been provided by the University Administration concerning assessment requirements in a new merged department.

In addition, since establishing the Department of Environmental Studies at UNCW (by removing it from the then Department of Earth Sciences), the Department of Geography and Geology has worked hard, particularly in recent years, to reinvent itself and create a clearly recognizable and respected brand at UNCW and in the academic community. We have added variety, innovation and rigor to our programs and students are finally beginning to understand who and what we are. The merger will undermine all these efforts and create a department with an unrecognizable brand that does not exist in any other curricula in any other academic institution in this country. The combined department will likely be perceived as a “downgrade” for all programs regardless of any public relations work to the contrary. The impact on student and faculty recruitment in each department is obvious. The impact to UNCW and its overall reputation and rating is clear as well. None of our peer or aspirant institutions has a combined department of this nature. They all have separate physics and geosciences departments. An administrative structure in which multiple science departments are combined is the hallmark of community colleges or second-tier regional colleges, and is grossly inconsistent with UNCW’s current prestigious rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*, *Forbes*, *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Kiplinger’s*, *Princeton Review*, and *G.I. Jobs*. It also is contrary to UNCW’s primary mission to “provide the most powerful learning experience possible for its students”.

- 3) **Negative impact on faculty and programs** --The unprecedented nature of the proposed merger, the lack of common ground between the disciplines at UNCW, and the radically disparate nature of the two departments raises a number of other significant concerns. In particular, we have concerns about student, faculty and staff morale, long-range program planning and assessment, RTP policies and procedures, workload allocations, resource allocations including faculty lines, and numerous other procedural stumbling blocks. Such concerns have been raised to the College of Arts and Sciences, but the administration has yet to provide any guidance on the mechanics of this merger and has indicated that the “details” of the merger would be determined by the faculty. At present, each department has its own policies and procedures governing RTP decisions, workload allocations including committee service, and resource allocations including planning for re-tasking of faculty lines. The latter is of particular concern given the uncertainty of the budget and the distinct possibility that the Department may lose additional lines when the number of faculty increases disproportionately to the number of total majors. The extra workload of merging the policies and procedures for two vastly different departments to the satisfaction of all involved is enormous and could take years. Moreover, the differences will be very hard to resolve, given the awkward fit between the departments and the fact that few, if any, successful merger models exist at UNCW or elsewhere. Many of the main issues such as RTP decisions, future hires, space allocation, teaching and service workloads, and budget allocations for teaching supplies, field trips, and travel are already challenging issues in a department as diverse as Geography and Geology. In a combined hybrid department they could become virtually unsolvable. We are concerned that the stress and strain produced by this ill-conceived merger will result in decline of faculty morale (minimum impact) and potentially to the demise of one or more of the constituent programs (maximum impact). The loss of any of these programs will compromise UNCW’s ability to provide a comprehensive, university-level liberal arts experience. Even if the negative programmatic impacts are minimal, the decline in morale at the faculty level will spread to the student level and undermine significant recent efforts by Geography and Geology to update curricula and recruit young faculty and new students. One of the most troubling impacts will fall

on our untenured faculty members. These colleagues were recently hired under the impression that our department has a plan to build our reputation around areas of common interest including coastal geology, environmental-resource issues, climatology, oceanography, and geospatial technology. Instead, most of our strategic planning efforts will likely have to be diverted to the question of how to make this hybrid department work, and where to position our new faculty hires. Further, the increased workload produced by the merger will have financial consequences. For example, research-active faculty who have a record of grantsmanship will be less likely to pursue external funding if their energies are occupied by working out details of the merger. Good faculty morale is a key component to developing high quality instruction, scholarship, and grantsmanship. The potential decrease in funding, morale, and research productivity vastly outweigh the meager savings produced by the merger.

As we understand it, the actual net cost savings of this merger to CAS are approximately \$80,000. Given that the Department of Geography and Geology will lose a staff position in January (regardless of the merger), the actual net cost savings of the merger is ~\$40,000. In meetings with the administration, the Department of Geography and Geology has proposed several alternative scenarios to save \$40,000 without merging the departments. Since then the department has identified several additional alternatives. If a merger is absolutely necessary, then we suggest merging one of these departments with another where positive synergies might be developed. For example, positive synergies have developed with the combination of Computer and Information Services with Business and among the departments now combined in the School of Health and Human Sciences. However, these reorganizations resulted after years of careful planning. From our perspective, it appears that the proposed merger is one of convenience and nothing else. There is little evidence that the potential impacts of the proposed merger were fully explored prior to this decision. Further, it is troubling that there was no attempt to consult with experts (at UNCW or elsewhere) to garner input about the potential issues, challenges, and impacts that could arise from this action. Only minimal guidance from the University Administration on how such a merger will occur has been provided to the involved departments. Rather it has been indicated that the faculty in each department will have to divine or conjure “some way for this to work” in addition to their normal teaching, research, and service workloads. An apparent savings of \$40,000 and the fact that the two departments share space in the same building are not sufficient reasons to merge these departments and jeopardize years of effort to streamline, develop, and implement academic programs and research priorities in our department, destroy the morale of existing faculty, and endanger the careers of junior faculty.

Given the complexity of the proposed merger, strong opposition from both affected departments, and the lack of an existing plan or merger model, the Department of Geography and Geology respectfully requests reconsideration by UNCW leadership. Moreover, because of the anticipated (and more likely unanticipated) outcomes of the merger, we request that the proposed merger and issues highlighted above are reviewed and addressed by the following University and Senate Committees: Academic Standards, Faculty Welfare, Budget, Research, Faculty Relations and RPT. We welcome any insight and suggestions that these committees may be able to offer.

Respectfully Submitted,

Faculty, Department of Geography and Geology