

June 7, 2005

Dear Chair/Department Head,

In February, we participated in an important workshop, *Building Strong Geoscience Departments*, to discuss the state of geoscience departments and to develop ideas for strengthening our departments. The workshop was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, sponsored by the National Association of Geoscience Teachers, and hosted by the College of William and Mary.

The twenty-five participants included geoscientists from research-intensive Ph.D. granting institutions, comprehensive and regional institutions, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges, and included a number of chairs and several senior administrators. We discovered that we face similar challenges, even though we are from departments with very different missions and of very different sizes. We would like to share some of the highlights of the workshop with you.

Collectively, geoscience departments across the nation are experiencing a number of challenges (Feiss, 2005) including the closure or threat of closure of departments (Keene, 2005, Rossbacher and Rhodes, 2004). However, in the workshop we heard about many successful practices and innovative ways both to expand and strengthen departments. We believe that the future of geoscience departments is bright, if we take advantage of our strengths and work together.

A number of key overarching themes identified at the workshop are seen as critical factors in building strong departments.

- Defining the mission of the department in such a way that it is aligned with the institutional vision.
- Taking a proactive stance in building modern and dynamic geoscience curricula and, as appropriate, research agendas.
- Working effectively as a department team.
- Acknowledging that recruitment, development, and retention of students, faculty, and staff are key elements of departmental success.
- Developing strong departmental leaders now and for the future.
- Communicating success, using effective metrics, to colleagues, senior administrators, students, donors, and friends.
- Forging strategic partnerships within the university (e.g., with biosciences, engineering, environmental studies, or geography) and outside the university (e.g., employers or alumni).

The workshop participants came away with the sense that all would benefit from broader sharing of the strategies and approaches that geoscience departments have used to successfully move forward, as well as resources that are helpful in developing and managing a successful departmental program. The workshop conveners have begun to develop a website with such materials (<http://serc.carleton.edu/departments/>). As an example of the types you will be able to find there, we attach the draft document from the workshop “Characteristics of a Thriving Geoscience Department.”

To extend the conversations begun at the workshop, a town meeting will be scheduled at the fall meeting of the Geological Society of America in Salt Lake and two sessions will be organized for the American Geophysical Union meeting in San Francisco. We hope that you will participate in the discussion and submit abstracts describing the activities in your department that make it strong.

As an expression of your interest, so that we may keep you informed as to the progress of the Building Strong Geoscience Departments initiative, please sign up for the Departments listserv on the website (follow the links to Geo Departments Listserv).

Sincerely yours,

Beth Ambos, California State University, Long Beach
Scott Bair, The Ohio State University
Greg Baker, University at Buffalo
Tim Bralower, Penn State University
David Chapman, University of Utah
Diane Clemens-Knott, California State University, Fullerton
Diane Doser, University of Texas at El Paso
Carl Drummond, Purdue University
Carolyn Eyles, McMaster University
Geoff Feiss, College of William and Mary
David Jon Furbish, Vanderbilt University
Steve Good, West Chester University
Jack Hehn, American Institute of Physics
Chris Keane, American Geological Institute
Ed Laine, Bowdoin College
Lisa Lamb, University of St Thomas
Heather Macdonald, College of William and Mary
Bob MacKay, Clark College
Cathy Manduca, Carleton College
Dave Matty, Central Michigan University
Randy Richardson, University of Arizona
Dallas Rhodes, Georgia Southern University
Jill Singer, Buffalo State University
Cathy Summa, Winona State University
Al Trujillo, Palomar College
Jim Tyburezy, Arizona State University
Herb Wang, University of Wisconsin, Madison
John Williams, San Jose State University

Feiss, P.G., 2005, Opportunities and Threats - A View from the Top, workshop presentation available at http://serc.carleton.edu/files/departments/Feiss_Departments.pdf
Keene, C., 2005, National Perspectives on Disciplinary Health Trends, workshop presentation available at http://serc.carleton.edu/files/departments/Keane_presentation.ppt
Rossbacher L., and Rhodes, D., 2004, Building Geology for the Future: Cui bono?, Geotimes September, 2004.