

Central Michigan University

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Central Michigan University is classified as a doctoral/research-intensive university by the Carnegie Foundation and has a current on-campus enrollment of approximately 20,000 students. It is a rural institution located in a town of ~28,000, is far from major Michigan population centers, and is the northernmost state-supported university in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Originally chartered as a Normal School for prospective teachers, CMU is now a rather large, comprehensive university that is listed among national institutions by US News. In my opinion, however, it is still searching for its identity.

The Department of Geology at CMU came into existence in the late 1960's primarily as a result of a geologist becoming the Dean of the former School of Arts and Sciences. At that time, geology was part of the Geography Department, and in 1971, with the Dean's urging, the geology faculty formed a new Department of Geology. Some of the antics that occurred as a consequence of this departmental split haunt both departments today, but more on that later....

In the early years of our department, there existed a good mix of faculty of different ages, specialties, and experience. All faculty were strongly student focused and maintained an "open door" policy that encouraged interaction with students. The tradition of mentoring undergraduate students in research projects began in the 1970's and continues to this day.

In the decades since, the department has evolved yet remained the same. Faculty have come and gone, and some have made more of a mark than others. Over the years, we have argued successfully for additional faculty, and the size of the department has grown most recently to 4 tenured, 3.5 tenure-track (one joint appointment), and 3 adjunct faculty. Facilities have improved. We occupy almost five times the space we had in the 1970's and our classroom and lab facilities were extensively remodeled about a decade ago. We have acquired and maintain a number of analytical and field instruments that many undergraduate-only departments would envy. We are well-funded by our administration, and our normal budget allows us to subsidize field trips, faculty development, and equipment purchase and upkeep. Our library holdings benefit greatly from the attention of our science librarian, who holds a MS in experimental petrology from the University of Chicago.

The support of the university, a stream of excellent students, and certain values shared among the faculty have shaped our department and have helped it to remain strong over the years. Of course, all faculty are recruited and selected on the basis of their potential to teach well and to maintain a successful (and hopefully funded) research program, but perhaps most importantly, we strive to hire new colleagues who demonstrate a strong student focus in their application materials and, especially during their interviews.

Because we share a dedication to our students as a common focus, we find that we are able to agree on more things that we disagree on. This saves time and helps us all to "row the boat" in the same direction. We have impromptu meetings almost daily to share new ideas for teaching, and where possible, for research. We all have a "try and see" attitude rather than an "it can't be

done” one. We value and capitalize upon the diversity of strengths represented among the faculty. Our faculty includes several winners of university awards for research and for teaching, but this does not affect interpersonal relations and all remain collegial and willing to help colleagues when needed. We have one of the highest per-capita publication records at our institution and the record of securing external funding is also good. We’re a team.

Our majors benefit from our attitude and our resources. We treat them as a vital part of the department, provide them with various learning, research, and service opportunities, and set high expectations of them. We encourage them to work with faculty on research projects and to present and publish their results. Likewise, we encourage them to investigate opportunities “outside the box.” In recent years, one of our students has served as an AGI Public Policy intern and another as a Mars landing site adviser. Other undergraduates have published papers, presented at a Penrose conference, at regional and annual GSA and AAPG meetings, and have won a number of “best poster” awards in undergraduate research sessions at national meetings. About half of our students move on to graduate studies and the remainder find employment with industry or state government. We invite comments from the students about how to make the program better and we listen to their suggestions. Our curriculum is still rather classical, but has evolved in response to the comments and needs of students, and also to suggestions from alumni who know the needs of the workplace. In response to such suggestions, two new majors courses have been incorporated into the curriculum in recent years. How to ensure quality in the face of dwindling budgets and increasing class sizes is a constant problem with which we grapple.

A fair number of our alumni stay in touch with us, and we communicate with them via newsletters and through alumni events. Many are invited back to speak to our majors. We initiated an alumni board to provide input on curricula and other matters, and we are slowly establishing an alumni network to help alumni help current majors and each other. Several alumni serve as mentors for our current students a few are very active within the department and the college; one helped form our student chapter of the AIPG (the first in Michigan) and another is the current Chairperson of our College’s Capital Campaign Committee.

The success of our faculty, our students, and our alumni bring recognition to our program both within and beyond the university. Employers seek our graduates and we have several “corporate sponsors” that support our program through grants, scholarships, and by preferentially hiring our graduates. We work closely with our public relations and government affairs offices in an effort to draw internal and external recognition to the successes of our program. These efforts are exceedingly important as they keep our program in the field of vision of state and federal legislators, as well as on-campus administrators.

While we have a lot to be thankful for and proud of, the department has its troubles. As state appropriations and university budgets shrink, administrative attention sometimes shifts from quality to quantity, which conceivably makes our relatively expensive program vulnerable to potential cuts, mergers, or elimination. We have averaged only 6-10 graduates per year for the past five years, despite efforts to recruit students from introductory courses, etc. This is not good. At the same time, we’ve appeased administrators with an enrollment growth of about 25% during that period. This is due mostly to new general education courses, but such growth takes its toll in the time that faculty expend on instruction. Arguably, to some extent, our small number of

majors may be related to the troubled birth of our department and to the continued existence of a separate “earth science” program in CMU’s geography department. Resolution of our role in CMU’s earth science teacher education program and in the non-teaching earth science program (if such a program continues to exist) are topics of current discussion and at the very least, we will be exerting a stronger voice at those tables in the near future. Given that we maintain a strong program with a small number of students and faculty at present, our next challenge will be to maintain that program in the face of our expanded presence in these other related areas.