MISSION
The Department of Geography sharpened its focus on graduate education subsequent to its most recent periodic review (completed in 2004). Our focus on human-environment interaction as seen through the lens of geographic information science (GIScience) builds on our existing faculty strengths and enables us to offer elite, inter-connected programs in basic GIScience as well as the geography of health, environmental justice, land-use and global change. We are particularly strong in the development of spatial computational models in these areas of study. The mission of the graduate program in the Department of Geography is to impart to students the ability to conduct significant research in our focus area. Our aim is to produce student cohorts who will form the next generation of leaders who are employed in peer institutions and nationally-recognized research centers.

ADMISSIONS PROCESSES AND CRITERIA
Our admissions process is competitive. We are able to attract and enroll high quality students while maintaining high standards of selectivity.

Demand. Historically, we have had more than 40 graduate program applications to consider each year. Though we experienced a dip in 2006, the number has rebounded. The number of completed PhD applications may be smaller, but many students who list MA as a degree objective on their application also write in their letters that they intend to continue for a doctorate, and we consider such students as potential doctoral students. Given our focus on GIScience, it is likely that demand will increase, since this area has an abundance of academic as well as public and private-sector employment opportunities for graduates.

Criteria for selection. We consider five factors during admission of graduate students:
1. How well their aims match our mission and our ability to provide a high quality education in their expressed area of interest;
2. Their preparation, including institution and GPA and the body of courses in which they have earned that GPA;
3. Their GRE scores as an indicator of potential for graduate study;
4. Letters of recommendation that address the candidates’ potential for advanced research; and
5. The contribution of individual candidates to diversity in our discipline.

We also evaluate English-language proficiency for international students using TOEFL scores and telephone interviews.

Success in enrolling the highest quality students admitted. We are usually successful in enrolling our top candidates. We have had 4 Presidential Fellows in recent years (GC data, 2004-08), which is high relative to our total number of applicants, our admission selectivity, and our size. Two additional points are notable:
1. The GPA of entering students has fluctuated, rising to a high value of 3.50 in 01-04 and hitting a low value of 3.32 in (04-07). It is important to note, however, that the lowest value (3.32) exceeds UI average scores for several years during the reported period of record.
2. Our incoming GRE scores (V+Q=1261, 04-07) are well above those observed for UI Social Sciences and all UI programs. At different points in the recent past, Geography scores have averaged well over 100 points higher than the aggregated UI Social Science scores. When UI Geography is compared to national geography programs our scores are consistently on the order of +300 points.

These scores indicate that the department is attracting a strong group of applicants.
Financial aid commitments. Our standard commitment is to provide four years of half-time support for each admitted PhD student, subject to an annual faculty evaluation of satisfactory progress toward the completion of degree requirements. This commitment is often extended beyond the four years to cover variations in duration of residence due to field work and dissertation writing. Faculty members in the Department of Geography are successful in obtaining external support for their research activity. Consequently, many of our graduate students are not only able to gain experience in the classroom while serving as teaching assistants, they are also able to gain valuable research experience working with their faculty mentors on sponsored research projects. In fact, as CLAS support for TA lines has eroded slightly during recent semesters, increased extramural funding has enabled the department to provide a near constant level of graduate student support (Table 1).

Table 1. Graduate assistantships, by type, 2007-2009.

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<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>TA - HTE</th>
<th>RA - HTE</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA09</td>
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Geography faculty members are committed to seek external funding for their research programs. It is likely that funding will increase during the next several years given our shift in focus to areas that are eligible for NSF and NIH funding.

Success in enrolling a diverse student cohort. Our gender diversity (11 women, 18 men) requires further attention. We currently have one African American male, of whom there are few in our discipline nationally, and one Latina. We consistently attempt to use fellowships from the graduate college to increase our ethnic diversity. We also have a number of international students (4 South Asian, 3 East Asian, 1 African, 1 Caribbean).

PROGRAM OUTCOMES
Our department has traditionally been nationally known for producing high-caliber Ph.D.s.

Honors and recognition. Our graduate students are very competitive for honors. Our students regularly win awards for papers presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

Degree completion and TTD. Although our current degree completion rate appears to be too low and TTD too long, extenuating factors exist. Of the 25 students entering 1996-2000, 8 completed the doctorate with a median TDD of 5.4; this TDD was lower than any social science program except Health & Sport Studies. Of those 25, 6 are still enrolled, 6 left after an MA and 5 left without a degree. Of the graduates in 2003-08, our median TTD (7.1) was no longer the lowest of the UI social science programs; many students who graduated in that period were caught up in a wave of faculty turnover due to several retirements and resignations. Most of the students with TDD above our median experienced the loss of their main advisor during their graduate studies. The TDD of the other half of those students was 5 yr + 1 semester. With a more stable faculty we believe that our rates will improve after a few more of these “orphaned” students finally finish.

Placements. Our placement results are strong: 94% of our recent doctoral graduates are working in areas in which their degree is relevant. Over the past 10 years we have placed 19% of our graduates as tenure track faculty in other Ph.D. programs:

- Illinois
- Ohio State
Texas A&M
South Florida

Another 10% are postdocs in peer institutions: Illinois, Michigan, Columbia. 45% are teaching in other university or college programs, about 10% of which are non-tenure track (including 2 at UI), and 19% are in research positions to which their degree and education are relevant.

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Appropriate size. Our faculty size has fluctuated during the past 10 years. This instability in numbers and areas covered was the most significant problem that our graduate program faced. Formerly we had more graduate students per FTE than any program in CLAS social sciences except Social Work and Health & Sports Studies, which have relatively large MA programs. After recent hires our current ratio of 29 students to 10 tenure track faculty is about right, but we remain a relatively small program among our peers.

Mentoring and development. Time distinctly separate from teaching is not allocated for working directly with graduate students. Faculty advisors do this mentoring individually through joint research or other interactions.

Curriculum and program for completion. The department reorganized its curriculum to improve student progress toward the degree. We have instituted a pair of core introductory courses for doctoral students and a sequence of courses for MA students in GIScience that can be adjusted for doctoral students as appropriate. With an increasing faculty size and better program structure we are improving our ability to implement a curriculum that enables students to complete degree requirements in an appropriate time-frame.

Fellowship opportunities. The department participates regularly in Graduate College fellowship programs. In recent years these programs have included Presidential Fellowships, Graduate Dean’s Fellowships, Dissertation Year Fellowships, and Ballard and Seashore Fellowships. The department aims to increase the number of applicants for externally funded fellowship or dissertation enhancement grants.

Centrality. We are committed to engaging graduate education broadly across campus. We are centrally involved in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Informatics, and we are the only department to be participants in both of the IGERT proposals that were selected by NSF for full development and submission this fall. In the past 10 years our faculty has served on graduate committees in 10 other departments across 5 colleges on campus (as well as at 11 other universities).

SUMMARY

Our graduate program strengths lie in the area of close work between active, productive faculty and students. Many graduate students participate in funded research projects to the extent that they are coauthors on papers in refereed journals before completing their dissertations, and most are able to publish significant articles from their dissertations. This productivity underlies our ability to place students into good research positions and to attract strong cohorts of new graduate students.

We always look to improve our program. In order to move all students more quickly and strongly into research and publishing, we have developed a team-teaching approach to our introductory core graduate courses, required of all graduate students, that will start them out on a more level playing field. Additionally, we see that our more focused mission is already paying dividends in developing better interaction among beginning students. More of our students are using the three-papers dissertation format, which seems to be more time-efficient. And we have recently improved our faculty gender diversity, which we think will have a commensurate effect in our graduate student population.