I. Vision Statement/Relation to College Mission/Geography Background

In accordance with the Mission of St. Norbert College, the Geography Program strives to provide students with intellectually demanding and personally rewarding geographic study to help guide them along a path to become “responsible citizens of a diverse, interdependent, changing world.” Geography’s power lies in its spatial perspective, which leads to a clearer understanding of dynamic human and physical patterns and processes across the globe at all scales. The Geography Program endeavors to connect students to these spatial understandings, and also to reflect and inspire foundational aspects of a liberal arts education, particularly those of instilling a global perspective and of developing an understanding and respect for other peoples near and far. Geography plays an important role in the College’s mission and set of core values by encouraging and helping SNC students to “embrace a diversity of persons, perspectives and cultures.”

A bit of background might be helpful for the committee. Geography is an old discipline (the term is Greek—geo + graphein = “to write about,” or “to describe” the “Earth”). This definition is quite broad, of course, and the discipline today reflects this breadth of meaning. At least two important dichotomies have evolved within research and teaching in the discipline, including “systematic-regional” and “physical-human” divisions. A kind of “trichotomy” also appears to be present in geographic study, since its efforts “to describe the Earth” span the academic globe from science to social science to humanities. This trichotomy is particularly relevant at a liberal arts institution like St. Norbert, one with a strong core set of values, a learning place where the geographic perspective can be easily and fruitfully combined with other disciplinary viewpoints to the advantage of students.

The constant in geographic study is the “spatial approach.” A 2006 National Research Council report¹ states that “Spatial thinking—one form of thinking—is based on a constructive amalgam of three elements: concepts of space, tools of representation, and processes of reasoning. It is the concept of space that makes spatial thinking a distinctive form of thinking.” While geographers do not exclude other approaches, they look first to ask and answer spatial questions like “Where is IT?” (IT being whatever phenomenon is being considered), “Is There a Pattern?” (few phenomena are distributed randomly), “Why is IT There?” (and not somewhere else), and “So What?” (what does it matter to us or to others?). A near-constant in geographic study is the use and construction of maps as tools of representation, interpretation, and analysis. Maps have been called "the language of geography," and their use is nearly universal in geographic study.

Geographers attempt, in their teaching, to help students learn to look at the world in ways different than most of them are accustomed to doing. Instructors of Geography strive to help students see natural and human landscapes differently—in spatial terms. Anecdotally, many if not most students enrolling in Geography courses on this campus, even those who say they’ve had geography courses in high school, seem to have geography envisioned as merely a map with memorized place names—geography as a dreary litany of lists (sure to anesthetize even the most inquiring young mind). The challenge and reward, of course, is to transform this perceived simplistic view of Geography into an enriched understanding of the world.

Real-world examples of geographic issues and concepts help, and they’re always close at hand—from last evening’s news stories to tomorrow morning’s school commute. In Geography courses taught here, students have the opportunity to take away a lasting perspective of the world not likely gained otherwise. These spatial concepts, tools of representation, and processes of reasoning give students opportunities to deepen understanding of their world and the lives of others—and of their own lives, throughout their lives. A College with a core set of values like St. Norbert would be irresponsible if it did not provide these geographic concepts, tools, and processes of reasoning to those “responsible citizens of a diverse, interdependent, changing world” who leave here after four years of study.

II. Program Description

The Geography Program, as currently constituted, is a service program for the General Education Program/Core Curriculum. Geography courses offered at St. Norbert College (World Regions and Issues, Social Geography, Global Urbanization, Ethnic Geographies of the U.S., and the occasional Special Topics and Field Study courses) provide our students with opportunities to gain spatial understandings, to acquire skills in constructing and interpreting tools of representation (particularly maps), and to learn processes of reasoning that foster a deeper awareness and appreciation of how their world works. The Geography Program regularly offers two Difference and Diversity Courses – GEOG 225 Social Geography and GEOG 155 Ethnic Geographies of the U.S., and two Beyond Borders courses - GEOG 140 World Regions and Issues and GEOG 363 Global Urbanization. These four courses were all successfully proposed and accepted for the Core Curriculum. A GEOG 354 Geography Field Study course has been offered infrequently, as with an offering to Zambia Project service-learning students. A GEOG 489 Special Topics in Geography course, “Introduction to Geographic Information Systems,” has been offered a couple of times (2011-2012).

The Geography Program is coordinated (surprise) by the one full-time faculty member (Bockenhauer), in consultation, of course, with the Associate Dean/Division Chair of Social Sciences. In addition, over the past few years, the discipline coordinator has enlisted three superb Geography adjuncts: Dan Tilly, a local GIS professional for Intro to GIS, Eric Schurer for Social Geography, and Parisa Watson for Ethnic Geographies (Eric and Parisa are both master’s degree high school AP Human Geography instructors). The newest GEOG course, Ethnic Geographies of the U.S., was created by Watson in response to a call for more Difference & Diversity courses.

III. Progress Toward Strategic Goals

Progress toward strategic goals arising from the 2010 review remains incomplete - “in progress.” As stated in the submitted 2010 review – and recommended by the review committee, the intention to “grow” the Geography Program with the offering of new courses and the hiring of a new FTE faculty member” has been only partly successful. Successes have included the creation and offering of two new courses over the past few years - the “Introduction to GIS” and the “Ethnic Geographies” courses. The “Intro to GIS” course was taught in 2011 and 2012 by Dan Tilly (a Green Bay-based GIS professional) as an evening course. In 2014 and again in the current semester, Geology has hired another GIS professional as an adjunct, Jeff Dumez from the Brown County Land Information Office, to teach a similar introductory GIS course – open to anyone but in demand by environmental science and geology majors. Bockenhauer has worked with Nelson Ham in Geology and Krissy Lukens in IT to collaborate and plan for campus GIS needs.
A related and important (though unstated at the time of the 2010 review) area of growth in Geography is that of developing capabilities to teach in an online environment. Bockenhauer worked with Ms. Watson to make her Ethnic Geographies course a hybrid one, in which she met a half-dozen or so times face-to-face, but worked primarily online with her students (feedback was quite positive for this approach in its first edition – Fall 2014). In addition, Bockenhauer recently (January 2015) created a J-term section of Social Geography entirely online (and student feedback was quite positive for this effort, too). Moreover, with the aid of a DLI course redesign grant during the current year, Bockenhauer is incorporating more online assignments and geo-spatial technologies (and more technology in general) into all of his courses. The discipline is thus prepared to offer additional courses online, should there be demand for more online offerings.

However, the second and more important goal stemming from the 2010 program review has not yet been achieved – that of hiring a second full-time Geography faculty member. This hiring would enable the program to offer a minor in Geography, and put it on a path to then construct a major in Geography. An enhanced Geography Program would serve the College (students, faculty, and staff) in productive and collaborative ways. Such a hire in Geography, or perhaps even in a shared, interdisciplinary appointment, would serve and stoke the growing need for Geographic Information Systems instruction (“geo-spatial technologies” might better capture the scope of this instruction). A new faculty member who could teach a course or two in GIS/geo-spatial technologies, plus offer Core Curriculum and other Geography courses would fill the bill nicely. This would allow more students here to learn and to use the spatial perspective and skills with relevant technologies, of increasing value in careers. Bockenhauer has received encouragement and advice from Nelson Ham about such a hire, and has informally discussed this need with Dean Frick in November 2014— but has not yet put together a formal proposal for such a hire. The making of such a case is a priority in the coming months. The building of a robust program with a minor and/or major in Geography would strengthen St. Norbert College as it strives to live its core value of being an “international learning community.”