

A History of the Department of Environmental, Earth and Geospatial Sciences



The Department of Environmental, Earth and Geospatial Sciences was created in 2005 when the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences merged with the Environmental Science Program.

Dr. Theodore R. Speigner created the Department of Geography in 1960. It offered a Bachelor of Science degree and carried with it a teaching degree track. The first class graduated in 1964. Under the leadership of Dr. Woodrow W. Nichols, the Master of Science in the Earth Sciences program was instituted in 1995, leading to the department's name change to Geography and Earth Sciences. In 1996, the Environmental Science program was formulated during the fall semester. Dr. Yolanda Banks Anderson was brought in from the Environmental Protection Agency to develop this program. In 1988, the geospatial technology offerings were increased, and in 2006, the Geospatial Research, Innovative Teaching and Services Center (GRITS) were developed under the leadership of Drs. Albert P. Barnett and Jasper L. Harris, with Drs. Rakesh Malhotra and Gordana Vlahovic playing major roles.

Dr. Theodore R. Speigner was the chair of the Department from 1960 to 1975. In 1975, Dr. Woodrow W. Nichols became chair and served in that capacity until 1995. Dr. Albert P. Barnett became chair in 1995 and remained chair until 2005. With the merger of Geography and Earth Sciences in 2005, Dr. Yolanda Banks Anderson became chair. In 2007, Dr. Anderson became acting Associate Dean of the College of Science and Technology and Dr. Jasper L. Harris served as acting chair from October 2007 to October 2008. Dr. Harris also served as chair during the 1979-81 academic years while Dr. Nichols was on leave as Director of University Programs at the U.S. Department of Transportation in Washington, D.C.

The Department of Geography was housed in a wing on the third floor of the Taylor Education Building, where it remained for approximately forty-five years. During this time, part of the Department's faculty relocated into the Old Faculty Apartments Building from 1980 to 1990, before moving back to the Taylor Education Building. In 2005, the Department was moved to the west wing of the first floor of the Mary Townes Science Complex.

The early mission of the Department of Geography was to develop in students the analytical and methodological skills necessary to understand the Earth's environment. It supported the educational needs of students seeking to develop skills in applied and general geography and the earth sciences, and promoted the creation and application of new knowledge in the geosciences. Early goals were to: (1) support the educational needs of students seeking to develop skills in applied geography and/or the earth sciences that are useful in achieving entry or mid-career advancement in occupations requiring these skills; (2) meet the educational needs of students seeking an education in general and/or the earth sciences in preparation of pre-college or community college teaching, graduate work, or as a general background for current or planned occupations; (3) implement a continuing program of faculty research and publication in applied and general geography and the earth sciences; and (4) implement a continuing program of research training for undergraduate, graduate and non-traditional students in applied and general geography and earth sciences.

A remarkable achievement of the Department occurred in 1988 when a report of the Association of American Geographers on the "Status of Minorities in Geography: A National Report" asserted that North Carolina Central University was the nation's leading producer of Black geographers.

The unit is proud of its many outstanding alumni. They include James Johnson, Jr., who is the William R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of Entrepreneurship and Director of the Urban Investment Strategies Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has published more than 100 scholarly research articles and three research monographs and has co-edited four theme issues of scholarly journals on these and related topics. His latest book is *Prismatic Metropolis: Inequality in Los Angeles*. He received his Ph.D from Michigan State University, his M.S. from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and his B.S. from North Carolina Central University in 1974.

Another distinguished alumnus is Audwin Helton, who received the Bachelor's degree in geography in 1982. He is currently president of Spatial Data Integrations Inc. His career started as a cartographer for the U. S. Department of Defense Mapping Agency, Louisville office, and he left the agency with the title of director in 1994.

The Department's current mission is to promote intellectual, professional, and personal excellence through the highest quality instruction, research, and serve in the environmental, earth and geospatial sciences. Its vision is to be recognized as a

regional, statewide, and national resource for students and society as well as professionals who work in the many fields that are encompassed by the environmental, earth, and geospatial sciences.

Over the years, the Department has been able to attract five of its graduates with Ph.D degrees back to help with its development. Dr. Vinston Burton, Jr. '65 (UCLA), Dr. Woodrow W. Nichols, Jr. '65 (UCLA), Dr. Albert P. Barnett '69 (Arizona State), Dr. Jasper L. Harris '70 (UNC-CH) and Dr. Harris E. Williams '73 (Arizona State). Notably, the Department has nurtured the development of more Black Ph.Ds in geography than any other school in the country.

Prepared by Harris Williams, Ph.D.
and Jasper Harris, Ph.D.
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