Dear colleagues

For the past several years I have been advocating for an expansion of the GIS program at UMW. At present we offer a Geographic information Science certificate which requires 4 courses and the completion of a capstone course. Our numbers have steadily increased overtime and we have no trouble filling all of introductory sections on a regular basis. My data indicates that this year all recipients of the certificate, over 20 in total, had either found a GIS related job or were headed to grad school.

A key component of the certificate is the capstone experience. For the majority of students this is completed through an internship. Over time I have developed a stable of companies and government agencies that support interns providing them with invaluable experience and perhaps more importantly a great resume highlight. Indeed, the impact and importance of an internship during the job hunt cannot be overstated.

But, feedback from many of these sponsors is troubling. Many have stated that our students need more exposure to GIS, in particular more scripting skills and analysis skills. Without such skills they may not be in a position to secure the available internships.

It is my feeling that the certificate is no longer enough to ensure our students get to the top of the application lists and secure the interviews. GIS continues to grow and has a projected industry growth rate of over 35% per year. We need to keep up with the needs of this growth and expand our program.

Expansion of the program would accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse body of students now enrolled in the certificate. Each semester we now offer 4-5 introductory classes (GISC 200, Geog 250, EESC 205) all of which begin the year at capacity (18), thus annually we have roughly 120-160 students. Our upper level classes can accommodate only 1 section each semester. Students from Historic Preservation, Biology, Environmental Science, Business, Computer Science and other disciplines now constitute approximately half of all students enrolled in the certificate. It is no secret that GIS is fast becoming a required or highly desired skill listed in job adds today in most of those disciplines. As you know, not meeting a desired skill automatically results in rejection of your application. Indeed, more than a few students graduate then return after graduation to complete the certificate in order to meet the qualifications outlined in job advertisements.

I have lobbied long and hard to secure permission to expand the program into a major and even a take it to the level of a department. It seems that my efforts have failed to rally any support in spite of what I believe is a compelling position. Recently Provost Levin offered me a chance to build support for my case. The proposition was simple; if I could get the support of other departments he would reconsider the administration’s position on expansion of the GIS program. Ideally I would like your support to build a new inter-disciplinary department but would settle for what would be the first new major here at UMW since 1999.

Below I have prepared a justification for both a new department and a new major for you to consider.
With respect to a new major one of the options I have considered is the special major. I quickly
discounted this option. Special majors are not well known or advertised, if advertised at all. They also
require students to prepare a rationale and to work with an advisor to construct the major. The
curriculum committee must then approve the major. If accepted an advisor is assigned to that student.
In short this option increases faculty workload and will not serve to attract students. In addition,
students might not learn of this option till he\she is too far along in his\her studies.

A new major on the other hand addresses the growing demand for geospatial courses, it strengthens
UMW’s STEM offerings, and it will attract transfer students, high school students and military personnel
with a GI bill interested in specializing in geospatial studies. A GIS (Geospatial) major is also an excellent
option for double majors. GIS is becoming a required skill in the environmental science field,
environmental biology, business, historic preservation, anthropology, and archeology, areas of
computer science and in many other disciplines. And as you know the vast majority of geographers owe
their jobs to GIS. A double major geography and GIS would be a terrific asset for any student.

In addition, the program would be required to offer the selected courses on a regular basis. At the
present time students must wait as long as a full year to get into some of the higher level classes and we
now have a growing number of freshmen expressing interest in GIS as a major. There is also a ground
swell of GIS classes now being offered in high schools that is spawning students who want to major in
GIS. Indeed, JMU has a faculty position tasked with helping run AP GIS programs in the state. They offer
students JMU course credits for $300 if they pass the course. Where do you think students who want to
major in GIS are going to go? They are getting way out in front of this but we still have the stronger
program, at least for now. Finally, a new major would only require the addition of 3 new GIS courses;
other required courses would come from existing computer science offerings and offerings from other
departments in the future as they embrace GIS through future hires. A major would also allow us to
offer a 5 years masters stream. At the moment we cannot offer this to undergraduates as we do not
have enough graduate level courses, but with a major we could offer at least one more graduate level
course allowing an undergrad to commit to the MSGA program while still here.

Why am I advocating for a new department? Simply, GIS is inter-disciplinary in nature and should be
responding to the needs of the community not a single department. For this reason I would propose a
structure that initially has a Director who reports to a committee comprised of selected faculty
members from other supporting departments until such time that a formal department can be
supported.

To move forward with any of these options I need faculty support. To keep it simple, I am asking
department chairs to write a letter of support for either a new major or the formation of a new
department and or both! The letter does not need to get into specifics; I simply suggest you endorse the
expansion of the program. If there is enough support from the faculty the Administration will work with
me to pursue the idea further, otherwise expansion will not be considered.

Cheers, Brian