

BRENT DOBERSTEIN

CAG Award for Excellence in Teaching Geography

I. Excellence in Teaching Undergraduate Geography.

Prof. Doberstein is one of those unusual instructors who has a canny knack of effectively communicating and weaving together the disciplinary threads of geography to very large classes of undergraduate students. Brent's first year course, GEOG101 *Human Geographies: People, Space and Change*, recruits an average of 350 students. It is easy to see why since the course "revolves around the concept of 'Sustainability / Sustainable Development' as explored through Human Geography" and Brent is able to engage students from our program but also from across the campus, including from the Faculties of Engineering, Science and Arts. The course uses the lens of geography to examine a range of topics that existentially impact on our daily lives. As chair of the Department charged with evaluating instructor performance, student perception survey scores (used as part of this effort) from the course were always consistently in the top tier of student evaluations. This is impressive since large undergraduate courses generally have a large spread of student satisfaction; in this case the vast majority were (and continue to be) highly positive which is reinforced by the high enrolment rates. Brent's hazards course, GEOG306 *Human Dimensions of Natural hazards*, is also widely respected by undergraduates. Again, enrolments for GEOG306 are very high for what was previously a second year course (average enrolment = 210), and is now offered as a third year course (average enrolment = 120). Normal, third year elective course enrolments are generally less than 100 indicating that it is a highly sought-after course. To reinforce Prof. Doberstein's impact on student interest in Geography, his other third year course, GEOG356 *Resource Management*, also recruits well and currently recruits between 60 and 70 students each offering. These courses are offered to Geography student majors but also are taken by students from other programs across campus. In short, Brent's engaging style introduces a wide range of students to the discipline of geography, with many non-Geography students taking more geography courses at the upper level, perhaps just as additional electives, but sometimes as a minor. Essentially, because of his excellent teaching, he brings more students to the discipline, in various ways. Finally, as a further indicator of teaching effectiveness and impact, it was no surprise that in 2023 at the Faculty Graduate send-off event, Brent was voted by our students as "Favorite Faculty in Geography".



II. Excellence in Teaching Graduate Geography

Brent's graduate course in the Masters of Climate Change program, GEOG677 *Climate change, hazards and disaster risk reduction*, is an elective course that consistently recruits 20 students or more. This course is a key part of the professional graduate degree program and often leads to students working on a major research paper with Brent as the supervisor or an internship that Brent will routinely pass on to them. Again, this is a testament to his skill at distilling complex ideas in the hazards and disasters space, at the graduate geography level, which ignite student interest and cement their commitment to engaging with climate solutions through internship opportunities that he routinely shares as they progress through the program.

III. Excellence in delivering experiential education through field work The third area which is of significant note in Brent's teaching is his highly regarded international field course leadership which is aimed at undergraduate but which also includes graduates (GEOG430C/GEOG692 Field Research in Geography/ International Study). These courses, that leverage Brent's research expertise in international resource management and disaster risk reduction (DRR), bring students together to experience the practical side of his teaching in GEOG101, 306 and 356 and GEOG677. Brent has very successfully designed, executed and led field courses to Cuba and Indonesia in which students explore and see the impact of effective (and ineffective) resource management and DRR at the community level. For some students, these courses have been life-changing. While for all students, these courses significantly shift their perspectives and help to cement their view of a discipline that is firmly connected to space and place.

IV. Excellence in teaching through mentorship of undergraduates and graduates engaged in research Prof. Doberstein is fundamentally interested in his research and bringing students into his research through a supportive and nurturing environment; he clearly recognizes that both undergraduates and graduate students are the lifeblood of the research community and should be treated with respect and with equality while providing clear leadership. Brent provides effective professional guidance and very strong support to his students from the outset by encouraging students to take advantage of academic development opportunities (e.g., attending conferences and workshops) and career support by forwarding potential opportunities of interest (e.g., courses, workshops or potential jobs). New students are encouraged to read widely around their topic of interest while Brent helps to narrow their frame of geography research enquiry to something that is tractable and will achieve success. My experience of his students, having interacted with them in field courses and in my capacity as former department chair, has been that they have a strong awareness and knowledge of their research field at the critical times in their academic studies (e.g. undergraduate/masters topic definition, PhD comprehensive examination etc.). From a student perspective, Brent's commitment to his graduate students is exemplified in the accompanying letters from two students. Katherine transitioned into Geography at undergraduate having taken one of Brent's courses and is now in the Masters program with Brent as advisor and Michelle is a PhD student with Brent. Katherine notes that "*Having had the privilege of being mentored by Dr. Doberstein for the past seven years at the University of Waterloo, I can attest to his unwavering dedication to the success and intellectual growth of his students.*" And Michelle notes that "*Dr Doberstein consistently demonstrates a keen understanding of different learning styles, ensuring that each student has the opportunity to thrive*". I am sure that this is why Brent's students do exceptionally well during and beyond completion of their academic studies.