

TRACY BRENNAND

CAG Award for Service to the Profession of Geography

As Department Chair in the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University, Tracy clearly meets the stated criteria of ‘exceptional professional service’ that serves to advance ‘the profession and practice of geography in Canada’.

A Department Chair’s work is central to advancing the discipline of Geography, supporting research, teaching, and engagement within a university and beyond. I speak from experience (Nominator, Professor Nicholas Blomley, was Department Chair 2011-2014, and has been at SFU since 1989) in noting that being Department Chair is hard, stressful work.

Yet it is poorly recognized, and rarely celebrated. It is easy to do badly, and hard to do well. It requires patience, tact, vision, and energy. It’s even harder, I think, in our discipline. SFU’s Geography Department, like many, is remarkably diverse, comprising a full suite of social science (BA), science (BSc) and hybrid science and social science (B.Env) undergraduate honours, majors, minors and certificates, degrees that lead to professional accreditation (PGeo, PAg), graduate research degrees (MA, MSc, PhD), faculty and administrative staff, STEM research and teaching laboratories and equipment, and salary and operational budget. It includes faculty and students engaged in research in the humanities, social sciences, Geographic Information Sciences, and the ‘hard sciences’ in physical geography (themselves diverse). It is also worth noting that SFU uses a ‘Chairship’ model that differs from the more top-down ‘Headship’ found elsewhere. The former has considerably fewer autocratic powers, but must rely more on suasion and negotiation.

Tracy has served nine years as Department Chair (two 3 year terms from 2014-2020), and one 3 year term (2021-present): an extraordinary tenure that has produced lasting and transformative impacts on the practice of Geography. The fact that she has elected to take up the reins, and then stay on the job in order to see her work through to fruition is, indeed, worth noting (as is her longstanding membership in the University’s Senate). It is testimony to Tracy’s skills that she has not only been able to negotiate this challenging role, but to excel in it, and mobilize its capacities to advance and remake the discipline, even during times of crisis.

While there is much to underscore, I focus my comments on the transformative Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work that Tracy has advanced. It is hard to over-estimate the effects of her leadership on this. While some faculty and students have pushed for improvements on this front, it is Tracy’s leadership, endorsement, and personal example that has proven vital. The Department has changed for the better as a result. Not that many years ago, it was a highly masculine, white space, rife with unstated colonial and patriarchal assumptions. While there is, of course, so much more to be done, vital, systemic changes have been made under Tracy’s direction and leadership. Some examples:

- **Faculty hires:** under her watch, the Department has been able to hire some brilliant, energetic women of colour, including a CRC in the Geographies of Racialization and a new Indigenous hire. This has included a strategic cluster hire that brought two scholars with expertise on race into the department. Getting any new positions from university



administrators is hard enough at the best of times. That Tracy was able to wrestle this many new hires in areas that administrators often overlook, beyond pious lip-service, is remarkable.

- **Institutional supports:** Tracy recognizes that hiring racialized colleagues alone is inadequate. The everyday architecture of the department, designed to uphold masculine whiteness, needs to be remade. To that end, Tracy also spearheaded the creation of an EDI committee in the department (one of the first in the university that I am aware of). This has led to, among other things, a new Black, Indigenous and People of Colour department graduate scholarship, and renovations to department space, including a new community-painted Indigenous-created mural. This has also included changes to RTP guidelines to recognize the value and distinctiveness of the forms of community-engaged scholarship often practiced by our new colleagues. At the suggestion of the EDI committee, given its value to junior faculty, Tracy also embraced – and helped navigate – a revolutionary change to salary review, abandoning a zero-sum ‘merit-based’ approach in favour of a flat allocation, in which everyone gets the same score. At a department retreat, prior to the arrival of a new (and only) Indigenous hire, Tracy made sure that there was a morning long discussion regarding the ways in which we, as a department, could make our new colleague feel fully welcome.
- **Inclusive practice:** As one of my colleagues note: ‘it is not easy to bring about substantial change in an institution *and* to ensure that institution is more collegial and supportive than at the outset. But this is what she has done.’ It is one thing to propose change, in other words. It is another to get departmental support. It’s even harder when you only have the modest powers of a ‘Chair’. It is to Tracy’s credit that she has not only achieved remarkable change, but done so by bringing the department along with her. This is largely due to her open, transparent practice. As one faculty member notes, ‘there is no behind-the-backing on her watch... She talks through every move so that people have an opportunity to participate in decision-making.’ Remember, our department is a very democratic one. It is impossible to do anything substantial without an extensive conversation, collective deliberation, and support. Tracy works hard to ensure that decision making in the department is inclusive and transparent. As another writer notes: ‘To be Chair in Geography, one must be open, welcoming, and eclectic, as well as hard-working, perspicacious, and fair. All these descriptors apply to Tracy’.
- **Walking the walk:** One important aspect of inclusive practice is Tracy’s willingness to not only argue for change, but practice it herself. She personally models and practices inclusivity in many ways. For example, amidst all the everyday work of being a Chair (and instructor, and researcher, and supervisor) she elected to sign up for an Indigenous led anticolonial multi-day pedagogy program in 2022/23 called Moving Together in the Ways of the People run by SFU’s Centre for Educational Excellence in partnership with Kweykway Consulting. Her inclusive practice extends to all members of the Department. A staff member notes in their letter (attached), ‘Tracy offers space by making herself vulnerable as an open and proud member of the LGBTQ2+ community.... Her openness sets the tone for the entire department and has allowed staff members to bring their full self to work as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community’
- **Effecting improvement:** All this would be important on its own terms. However, at the same time, Tracy has been a formidable administrator, making sweeping improvements and changes across the entire department. She is immensely hard working and productive.

As one faculty member notes: 'When she puts her mind to an initiative (and she puts her mind to a lot of them) one can assume it'll come to fruition'. Under her capable direction, the department has hired 13 new faculty. The academic program has been reimagined, and new programs begun. Department space has been refashioned. Alumni engaged. A new communications initiative has been rolled out. This, and much more, has had tangible benefits, with a 15% enrollment growth, new funding for labs, alumni donations, and a growth in co-curricular and extra-curricular events. The Departments QS ranking has risen from 7th in 2015 to 5th.