

December 8, 2021

TO: Members of the Board of Trustees

FROM: Carl W. Lejuez, Ph.D. 
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

RE: Name Change from Department of Geosciences (GSCI) to Department of Earth Sciences (ERTH)

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Board of Trustees approve the name change from the Department of Geosciences (GSCI) to Department of Earth Sciences (ERTH).

BACKGROUND:

The rationale for the proposed name change, from Geosciences to Earth Sciences, stems from the need to find a name that adequately reflects the range of research and teaching that takes place in the department and benefits the department by being immediately recognizable and understood by students (and parents). In addition, the proposed name change will bring the department into line with national trends in the geological and related sciences.

Given that “geo-” is derived from the Greek work meaning “earth,” a shift to Earth Sciences may seem pedantic. However, over the past decade definition of the term “geosciences” has slowly evolved to refer specifically to the fields within the earth sciences that deal with the solid earth (e.g., geology, geophysics, geodesy, etc.), leaving out other fields such as hydrogeology, geochemistry, paleontology, paleoclimatology, paleoceanography, and many more, which are critical areas of teaching and research in most university departments, including UConn’s. “Geosciences” has also been adopted by the energy industry. Thus, as society turns away from fossil fuels due to their role as a driver of current climate change, the name “geosciences” can create a barrier to attracting students to our discipline. By contrast, “Earth Sciences” is widely recognized to be concerned with the solid Earth, its waters, life, and the air that envelops it. The relevant fields of study include the geologic, hydrologic, biologic and atmospheric sciences, with the broad aim of understanding how these broad systems have interacted to control Earth’s evolution through time and create its present features. UConn is not alone in shifting the department name from Geosciences to Earth Sciences. The American Geosciences Institute provides an annual directory of all geoscience departments in the US. This compendium shows that of the 108 R1 institutions with departments comparable to UConn’s, 57 feature Earth Sciences in the department (or school) name, whereas only 15 have retained the name Geosciences. An additional 30 utilize the names Geological Sciences or Geology. In this regard, the proposed name change will align the department with national trends.

Proposal for departmental name change

Department of Geosciences

Proposed name: Department of Earth Sciences

Proposed abbreviation: EARTH

This proposal does not presume any change in hiring, disciplinary focus, or administrative structure. In addition, no changes to major(s), minor(s), graduate and/or other related programs are proposed.

Justification

The rationale for the proposed name change, from Geosciences to Earth Sciences, stems from the need to find a name that adequately reflects the range of research and teaching that takes place in the department and benefits us by being immediately recognizable and understood by students (and parents). In addition, the proposed name change will bring us into line with national trends in the geological and related sciences.

Given that “geo-” is derived from the Greek work meaning “earth,” a shift to Earth Sciences may seem pedantic. However, over the past decade definition of the term “geosciences” has slowly evolved to refer specifically to the fields within the earth sciences that deal with the solid earth (e.g., geology, geophysics, geodesy, etc.), leaving out other fields such as hydrogeology, geochemistry, paleontology, paleoclimatology, paleoceanography, and many more, which are critical areas of teaching and research in most university departments, including UConn’s. “Geosciences” has also been adopted by the energy industry. Thus, as society turns away from fossil fuels due to their role as a driver of current climate change, the name “geosciences” can create a barrier to attracting students to our discipline. By contrast, “Earth Sciences” is widely recognized to be concerned with the solid Earth, its waters, life, and the air that envelops it. The relevant fields of study include the geologic, hydrologic, biologic and atmospheric sciences, with the broad aim of understanding how these broad systems have interacted to control Earth’s evolution through time and create its present features. Earth scientists use this knowledge to benefit society.

Most US K-12 school systems offer instruction in “Earth Sciences.” The term “Geosciences” rarely appears in the curriculum, and so is unfamiliar to many. In this regard, when students see our current department name, they have limited understanding of what we offer. We surveyed our current undergraduate majors, asking them if they were familiar with the term “Geosciences” prior to their arrival at UConn. Nearly half indicated they had not heard the term before taking a class in the department. Surveys of students in 1000 and 2000-level courses that are dominated by non-majors showed that while most students could define “Earth Sciences,” very few recognized the term “Geosciences” before enrolling in the class. At university open house events designed to recruit high school students, faculty have to explain what the geosciences are to students (and parents) before opportunities and careers can be discussed. The need to define ourselves in this way creates a barrier to recruitment that departments such as Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Geography, English, and many more do not have to overcome.

We are not alone in our proposal to shift the department name from Geosciences to Earth Sciences. For the reasons discussed above, the majority of university departments similar to ours across the US have undergone a name change over the past decade, from one involving geosciences, geological sciences, or geology to one that involves earth sciences alone or in combination with other terms such as atmospheric, climate, environmental, etc. The American Geosciences Institute provides an annual directory of all geoscience departments in the US. This compendium shows that of the 108 R1 institutions with departments comparable to UConn’s, 57 feature Earth Sciences in the department (or school) name, whereas only 15 have retained the name Geosciences. An additional 30 utilize the names Geological Sciences or Geology. In this regard, the proposed name change will align us with national trends.

The proposed name change was approved by consensus of the GSCI faculty on November 4, 2021.