MEMORANDUM

To: Faculty, Staff, and Students of the Geography Department

Cc: Risk Management, Building Operations, Project Services, and Infrastructure Development

From: Gage Averill, Dean of Arts, and Gerald Vanderwoude, Assistant Dean, Facilities and Human Resources

Re: Geography Town Hall Meeting, January 10, 2014

Date: January 23, 2014

We wish to express our thanks for relating concerns about the ongoing Geography building renovations at Friday’s Town Hall Meeting. While it was difficult to hear the numerous first-hand accounts of specific failures and challenges, it has provided us with a much clearer understanding of the situation.

In order to move forward, we felt it would be useful to summarize what we heard in order to guide our next steps.

General safety in the building

There have been many instances of safety issues/concerns during normal workday hours during the current construction project. Asbestos safety, holes in walls, dangerous working conditions, tripping hazards, and loud/profane language were just a few examples mentioned. It is clear that Project Services needs to take a more proactive role in monitoring the worksite and to immediately address potential hazards or unsafe conditions and to establish preventative measures so that safety issues do not arise. Gerald will advocate on your behalf.

Lack of response to specific safety queries

There has been a notable lack of communication between Project Services, Risk Management, and the Department. We heard of several instances where Geography’s Health and Safety Committee had made requests for specific safety information to which no response was forthcoming. Risk Management has not provided the necessary information to the unit regarding asbestos-related safety. Better coordination between Geography’s Health and Safety committee and UBC Risk Management is required. Gerald will bring this issue to the University Health and Safety Committee and work closely with Geography’s Health and Safety Committee to ensure that concerns are being addressed.
Lack of communication about the renovations

There does not seem to be a consistent mechanism for communication between the Department and the construction team. Unclear scheduling of work being performed, lack of clarity on work locations involved, short-term equipment placement, designation of emergency exits during work, and location of project work does not seem to be communicated to the Department. A posted schedule, clear communication to the administration and a consistent project services presence in the building would alleviate some of these concerns. Gerald will assist Sandy Lapsky and consult regularly with staff and faculty to ensure communication is improved.

Unusable classrooms and office space

Noise, dust, and fumes have made teaching/research in the building next to impossible. Every attempt should be made to move classes to different locations close by until the work is completed. Temporary office space should be secured for those wishing to relocate. Gerald will be meeting with Sandy Lapsky to assist in this process.

Geography morale

It is clear that the renovation has had a damaging effect on the morale of the unit. Building occupants have come to feel unsupported and undervalued as an educational community within UBC. This will take time to repair and will require consistent effort. It is clear that this renovation project included a very unfortunate series of circumstances combined with a failure to assess the impact of delays in construction. Had the renovations taken place on time and within the scope initially proposed, we believe a great deal of the issues in the building could have been addressed with far less disruption and dislocation.

Towards a new building

We heard over and over that Geography’s current home “is an old building,” and clearly the best long-term solution involves a new building. We believe that Geography’s facilities constitute the most pressing facilities problem in the Faculty of Arts, and we will work with the Department to move forward the planning for a new building. As we have made clear, the ability to build a new building is based on the availability of external funds, as neither the University nor Arts has the budgetary capacity to afford to build a building. Sources could include the Provincial government or philanthropy, and it is unclear when or whether we will have support from either for this project. Still, we want to be prepared, and the next step would be to define the project for Executive 1 approval (step 1), which will then allow us to draft a development case (step 2). We look forward to working with the Department on this important project and we will coordinate with the Head to solicit ongoing input from Geography’s various constituencies.