



FROM THE DIRECTOR



Dr. Lynn Soreghan

I am writing this about two weeks after the George Floyd killing — the horrific incident that reignited protests on issues of systemic racism and social justice — domestically and globally. But why begin my letter with this event — How does it relate to us — to OU Geosciences? My answer is multifold: this issue relates to us individually, and us societally — because we either stand together or fall together as humanity. But this issue relates to us as geoscientists because the geosciences are the least diverse field amongst all STEM disciplines, and that troubles me: we know that effective teams are diverse teams. Geoscientists will help navigate a sustainable future for humanity; thus we need all hands and voices and we need them now.

Like many other faculty and students, I had planned to be kicking off summer field work about now. Instead, we find ourselves in improvised home offices, muddling along through the COVID-19 pandemic. Uncertainty abounds following the wholesale cancellation of all spring events — the Expo, Research Symposium, colloquia, Spring picnic, MCEE banquet, AAC, First-Year field trip, even field-based field camp. Yet bright spots abound, as we discovered the blessings of Zoom, manifest in common refrains such as “You’re muted,” “Sorry — that was my cat,” and “No, don’t worry — your video’s off.” Yes, we miss seeing people in person — and we really miss being in the field — but it turned out that many events boasted better attendance than previously: thesis defenses, the AAC meeting, and guest-speaker events, to name a few. Plus, Dr. Dulin and her wizardly TAs crafted a virtual field camp that’s attracted widespread adoration. And we all witnessed striking images from around the world of cityscapes with remarkably clean skies and guarded emergences of wildlife.

The pages to follow offer a glimpse of both “pre-COVID” and “syn-COVID” activities in Geosciences, as well as some significant shifts in our faculty. Among the latter, we bid farewell to Dr. Shankar Mitra, who retired in December 2019, and to Dr. Roger Slatt, who passed away in February 2020. We regret that the pandemic caused cancellation of the memorial that Roger’s family had planned for March. In January we welcomed Dr. Yichuan Wang, who is overseeing the computer lab, and are welcoming the newest addition to our faculty — Dr. Junle Jiang (computational geophysics) in August 2020.

The future is perennially uncertain, and COVID-19 has cast more uncertainty than normal: We are facing pandemic-induced budget cuts, and associated delay before we can mount new faculty searches. But we remain hopeful; at this writing our freshman commits are double those from last year. Many thanks to our alumni for your continued support, and special thanks to Raleigh Blumstein for cheerfully leading the AAC.

I’ll close by returning to how I began: words go only so far in helping us evolve our culture. I hope we can begin effecting real change within ourselves and greater society by acts both small and large: by listening and learning to those who have endured systemic racism and all manner of discrimination, by working with our students to cultivate an inclusive and encouraging environment, and by working with the administration and our faculty to create a diverse geoscience program poised to lead us into a better future on planet Earth.