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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Geoscience student organizations at the University of Tennessee at Martin

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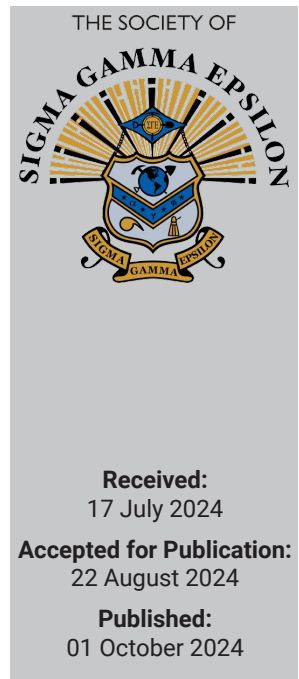
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## ABSTRACT

In celebration of 2022 Sigma Gamma Epsilon 46<sup>th</sup> National Convention being hosted by the University of Tennessee at Martin (UT Martin), Eta Alpha Chapter, this paper serves a synopsis that celebrates the history of student clubs and professional organizations in the geosciences program at UT Martin. The first geoscience student organization officially recognized by the University was devoted to geology, the GeoClub, and established in 1970 and still serves as the primary student organization for all of the geosciences. UT Martin established the Eta Alpha Chapter of Sigma Gamma Epsilon honor society in 1997. A Travel and Tourism club was in existence from 1994-1999, although it was not officially noted by the University until 1997. A student chapter of the American Meteorological Society was established in 2014, along with the establishment of that degree concentration. The most recent student organization to be established is the local chapter of the Association of Women Geoscientists in 2016.

## KEYWORDS

University of Tennessee at Martin, geosciences, SGE Eta Alpha, GeoClub, student organizations, AMS, AWG



## INTRODUCTION

Although geology and geography courses were taught at UT Martin from its early days as Hall Moody Institute, continuing through its evolution as UT Martin Junior College and then UT Martin Branch, it is not until 1969 that the first geoscience degree program will be established (Gibson, 2024A, this volume). Geology continued to expand and in 1967 UT Martin Branch becomes the University of Tennessee at Martin (UT Martin). With the groundwork laid for geology and geography, the program became degree granting in 1972 with three geology faculty members, three geography members, and a full curriculum. This occurred just two years after UT Martin established its first student organization devoted to geology, established in 1970. For the past 54 years, the student clubs, honor societies, and student chapters of professional societies have enhanced the collegiate experience for UT Martin geoscience majors and contributed

to the mission of the University. In celebration of 2022 Sigma Gamma Epsilon 46<sup>th</sup> National Convention, hosted by the UT Martin Eta Alpha Chapter, this paper serves a synopsis that celebrates the history student clubs and professional organizations in the geosciences program at UT Martin. For an overall history of the geology program, the reader is referred to Gibson (2024A, this volume), and this paper is intended as a companion history to that paper.

## RESOURCES

University catalogs, journals, announcements, annuals, newspaper stories, historical documents (e.g., correspondences, annual reports, self-studies, external reviews, town histories), and personal testimonies were analyzed to chronicle the history of geology at UT Martin. The publications cited in this summary, including recorded interviews of surviving faculty members in 2016, and additional historical documents consulted but not cited,

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are housed in the Office of Special Collections at Paul Meek Library on the campus of UT Martin. Departmental files of the geology program and club historical records are housed with the GeoClub in the Joseph E. Johnson EPS building. The Universities online database of Addenda articles, Spirit yearbooks, archival photographs, and the department's faculty newsletter were used to gather information on student activities.

## GEOCLUB

### History of GeoClub

The students in the geology program established its first student club in 1970, called the GeoClub ([Cavaness and Houstrup, 1988](#)). The GeoClub was established just after geography began to matriculate students for a degree in geography in 1969. The club's name will change over time (e.g., Geo Club, Geoclub, GeoClub), ultimately settling on GeoClub by the 1990s (FIGURE 1). The GeoClub had been organized by geology professor Ernest Blythe, who served as its first official advisor. The GeoClub's first appearance in the school yearbook, *The Spirit*, was 1970. The club members are pictured with geology faculty member Kenneth V. Bordeau in a candid photo. It was not until 1972 that the GeoClub is officially listed within clubs in the UT Martin Catalog ([UTM](#),

[1972](#)).

The original stated mission of the GeoClub was for students and professors at UT Martin drawn to the physical sciences, specifically geography and geology, to have more interaction with other peers in the scientific field. This role has since broadened to become an organization of students interested in all aspects of the Earth. Although membership in the GeoClub are mostly geology, geography, and meteorology majors, the club welcomes anyone interested in Earth science, travel, and fellowship. The GeoClub's first faculty advisor was Ernest Blythe. Blythe remained the faculty advisor until 1987 when William T. McCutchen joined Blythe as co-advisor. In 1992, Michael Gibson became the advisor (FIGURE 1) and in 1993, geologist Robert Self became a second advisor to GeoClub. In 1993, McCutchen returned to co-advise with Gibson. Gibson was the sole advisor in 1994 and 1995.

By 1994, UT Martin was asserting more control over organizations at UT Martin and their activities. The University began requiring organizations to develop and file a constitution with the Office of Student Life, so the GeoClub, which had been a more informally run organization up to this point, developed a constitution and a logo (FIGURE 2A). The constitution would undergo revisions in 2005 and again in 2021.



**FIGURE 1:** The 1992 GeoClub photograph taken outside of the EPS building. Advisor Michael Gibson is far right and future geology professor Thomas DePriest is standing behind the woman holding the letter C (photographer unknown).





**FIGURE 2:** Logos developed by the GeoClub (A) and student chapter of AMS (B).

By the early 1990s, geography students and geology students had begun to drift apart in terms of their interests, reflecting evolving differences in the two concentrations within geosciences. Helmut Wenz had developed a travel and tourism (T&T) program within the geography concentration in 1990 which was drawing a lot of interest (UTM, 1990). He also organized the T&T students into a loose organization similar to the GeoClub. By the mid-1990s, the GeoClub was dominated by geology majors, so their activities became more geology oriented. Geography students were voicing displeasure that GeoClub activities had become geology oriented and were not participating in GeoClub activities, nor were they seeking positions as officers in the club. This schism concerned the faculty, so in an effort to develop a shared atmosphere that may again reunify the GeoClub, the advisorship for GeoClub shifted such that two advisors would be elected by the club membership annually, one advisor would be a geologist and one would be a geographer. In spite of this, the schism continued.

By 1996, geographer Helmut Wenz had become the co-advisor with Gibson. Gibson and Wenz, along with biologist Wintfred Smith, began co-running international travel and tourism courses, primarily focusing on annual trips to Belize Central America and Quintana Roo, Mexico (Gibson and Wenz, 2003). The academic content of the trip was designed to blend the geosciences and these trips partially accomplished the goal of reuniting the geology and geography students; however, this did not manifest in geographers returning to the GeoClub, rather the geographers remained active in T&T. In 1997, the first year that the T&T club was listed in the catalog (UTM, 1997), Wenz folded the T&T club into the GeoClub (although it remained a catalog listing until 1999) as one more effort to reunify the students (UTM, 1999). Wenz and Gibson would remain co-advisors until 2005 when

Gibson becomes the sole advisor again for one year. Wenz retired in 2008. Geographer Jefferson Rogers joined Gibson in 2006 through 2008, at which time UT Martin's new meteorology faculty, Todd Albert, joins Gibson as co-advisor for two years until he leaves the University. Gibson's last year as a GeoClub advisor was 2010 with geographer Albert.

Geologist Ben Hooks became the geology advisor from 2011–2017, but there was no geographer co-advisor until 2016 when meteorologist Chris Karmosky comes on-board. Karmosky was the co-advisor for only one semester, however, as he left the University in 2016, followed by Hooks' departure in 2017. Jefferson Rogers returned to be the geographer advisor in 2016, and remained through 2018.

Geologist Stan Dunagan became an advisor in 2017. Dunagan was a UT Martin geology graduate and had served as GeoClub president for two years (1991 and 1992) as a student. He became the first student alumni to return as a tenure-track faculty (Gibson, 2024A, this volume) and the first GeoClub member to return to UT Martin as a GeoClub advisor. Dunagan and Rogers remain co-advisors until 2021 when newly hired geology laboratory instructor Audrey Pattat became the sole advisor. From this point forward, there will be no geographers as co-advisors. Geologist Angie Van Boening served as the geology advisor for the 2022 academic year. In 2023, the next newly hired geology laboratory instructor, Allison Bohanon took over as GeoClub advisor. By this time, meteorology and geography students were again participating in the club.

## GeoClub Activities

The GeoClub is both a service and social organization for the geosciences (<https://runway.utm.edu/organization/geoclub>). As a service club, the GeoClub is often the

“workhorse” of the department supplying manpower for numerous activities and projects (e.g., Coon Creek Science Center clean-up days). GeoClub members are often called upon to help with faculty visiting area schools for geology programing, meteorological demonstrations, and general department maintenance.

In 1996, the GeoClub took the lead in identifying an Official State Fossil for Tennessee. In 1997, the Eta Alpha Chapter of SGE was established (see below) and participated in the endeavor. Their activities included researching viable fossil candidates, traveling to schools across Tennessee, primarily by collaborating with the Tennessee Earth Science Teachers (TEST), to make presentations to teachers and students (see Gibson [2024B], this volume for information on TEST). In 1997 (FIGURE 3), they organized a state-wide voting campaign to allow students and educators to determine which fossil would be proposed to the Tennessee State Legislature. The winning fossil was the extinct Cretaceous

bivalve *Pterotrigonia (Scabrotrigina) thoracica*. In 1998, their efforts were realized and Tennessee became the 38<sup>th</sup> state to adopt a state fossil (see Gibson [2024B; 2024C] for more information about the state fossil). The GeoClub won the Tennessee Earth Science Teachers association Ptero Award for their efforts in 1999.

GeoClub is the primary group of geology majors that train and participate in the annual GeoConclave competitions. GeoConclave is an annual event where geology degree-granting institutions across Tennessee (and occasionally from nearby states) meet for fellowship and competition. The member school rotate responsibility for each year and organize field trips. The competition consists of fun activities (e.g., hammer toss, geogolf, etc.) and academic competitions (e.g., mineral, rock, fossil identification, structural geology interpretation, field mapping skills, etc.), culminating in the Rock Bowl. The Rock Bowl is an academic competition that tests each school’s knowledge of geology in a series



**FIGURE 3:** The 1997 GeoClub photograph taken in front of the school monument and University administration building. This is the GeoClub group that spearheaded the drive to establish a state fossil for Tennessee (photographer unknown).



of elimination rounds patterned after the College Bowl television series of the 1960s (see Haroldson and others [2020] and Gibson and others [2021] for an explanation of GeoConclave). GeoConclave is the GeoClub's primary annual event.

The GeoClub, along with the Eta Alpha Chapter of SGE (see below), presents programs and merit badge courses for various scouting groups. GeoClub members also usually man a give-away table at the Prime Student event aimed at sharing information about the geosciences major with the UT Martin student population. This is one of the club's primary recruiting events.

Lastly, the GeoClub is the primary student social organization in the geosciences. Members organize a variety of get-togethers (e.g., pizza parties, movie nights, tee-shirt tie dye events, rock and mineral sales, Valentine's Day giveaway, etc.). "Cheezy movie" nights have been popular over the years where movies with a geology theme, especially "B" movies, are shown and playfully critiqued.

## ETA ALPHA CHAPTER OF SGE

### Eta Alpha Chapter History

While the GeoClub does participate in academic enrichment events it remains a student club. By the mid-1990s, geoscience students were interested in establishing or finding a geoscience-oriented honor society that would add to their career development and that could be listed on resumes. Geologist faculty member Michael Gibson had been inducted into the Delta Beta Chapter of Sigma Gamma Epsilon: The Earth Science Honor Society (SGE) in 1982 as a graduate student at Auburn University, serving as the chapter president. He continued in the Gamma Gamma Chapter of SGE at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Gibson proposed to the geoscience students that they should consider petitioning SGE to establish a chapter at UT Martin and contacted the national council on their behalf. After a successful department visitation and evaluation by SGE by James Walters, the Eta Alpha Chapter of SGE was installed on April 3, 1997, as the 166<sup>th</sup> SGE chapter in the nation. Eta Alpha authored a chapter constitution by 1998 and filed it with the University, becoming officially recognized as a campus honor society. The Eta Alpha constitution was later revised in 2013. Gibson became the first faculty advisor and served until his retirement in 2023, when geologist Angie Van Boeing became the faculty advisor. The Eta Alpha chapter has always sought

the broadest membership in Earth sciences. Membership in the chapter not only draws from the geosciences program, but includes soils science students, astronomy students, and meteorology students. In 2018, Gibson received the Sigma Gamma Epsilon Earth Science Honor Society, UTM Eta Alpha Chapter, 30-Year Certificate of Appreciation for Service to SGE Eta Alpha Chapter. For the years 2006–2023, Gibson served as the SGE National Vice President of the Southeastern Region.

At the 2017 SGE national convention at Eastern Illinois University, the Eta Alpha Chapter proposed to host the 2019 convention on the UT Martin campus. The chapter immediately began the preparation process, which was to include a field trip to the Coon Creek fossil lagerstätte deposit. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic struck that spring forcing universities nationwide to enter into a lockdown. The 2019 meeting was rescheduled for 2020. Unfortunately, the pandemic prohibited a face-to-face 2020 meeting from occurring as rescheduled, although there was a virtual meeting, so the chapter again deferred to host the biennial convention for one more round. At the 2021 national officer meeting, held in conjunction with the 2021 GSA annual meeting in Portland Oregon, still under COVID-19 masking and distancing protocols, it was determined that UT Martin would move forward to host the 2022 biennial convention. By that time, UTM would have acquired and refurbished the fossil site, which would have been rededicated as the University of Tennessee at Martin Coon Creek Science Center (UTMCCSC). Subsequently, the 46<sup>th</sup> biennial meeting of SGE was held at UT Martin's Selmer Center and the UTMCCSC. At the convention, Gibson was presented with the Sigma Gamma Epsilon Earth Science Honor Society – Service & Dedication Award (2020), the presentation of which had been postponed by the pandemic. The reader is referred to Gibson (2024C, this volume) for highlights of that meeting field trip and to Ford and Potter (2024) for a summary of the meeting.

## TRAVEL AND TOURISM CLUB

The Travel and Tourism club was formed in 1997 by geographer Helmut Wenz. It is the shortest existing of the student organizations in the geosciences program. Wenz was a cultural geographer with a strong interest in travel and history. He was also an amateur archaeologist by interest. In 1990, Wenz began a new Travel and Tourism concentration within the Geosciences Program at UT Martin. That same

year he received a grant, with yearly funding thereafter, from American Airlines to expand the program. The program worked extensively with International Programs at UT Martin with many of the international students coming to study at UT Martin choosing this concentration. In 1997, Wenz formalized these students into the Travel and Tourism Club, which was listed in the UT Martin catalog ([UTM, 1997](#)). The concentration was abandoned in favor of adding a meteorology program in 2009 and Wenz retired in 2008. Without a T&T advisor or concentration, the club was disbanded.

## AMERICAN METEOROLOGICAL SOCIETY STUDENT CHAPTER

As noted above, the T&T concentration was discontinued in 2009 after Wenz retired in 2008. Geography was shifting emphasis to becoming a meteorology-oriented program since UT Martin hired meteorological geographer Mark Simpson in the 1990s. In 2011, a meteorology concentration, the only meteorology program in Tennessee, was added to the geosciences program ([UTM, 2011](#)) and a second meteorologist, Christopher Karmosky, trained as a glaciologist, was hired. A student chapter of the American Meteorological Society (AMS) was started in 2014 to complement the new program. Karmosky left the University in 2015 and the vacancy remained open until 2017 when Tim Wallace was hired as a lecturer in geosciences to help Simpson with the meteorology program. Wallace has specialties in severe weather, storm chasing, and winter weather. He earned his B.A. at the University of Memphis and a M.S. from Mississippi State University. The chapter developed a logo in 2022 (FIGURE 2B). Simpson retired in 2022. By 2021, meteorology graduate Shaley Dawson, who had been working at WBBJ-TV in Jackson, Tennessee as a broadcast meteorologist, returns to help expand the meteorology program by co-teaching a broadcast meteorology class with Wallace ([UTM, 2024](#)). Wallace left the program in July of 2024 and Aaron Scott was hired as a tenure-track replacement of Dr. Simpson and he takes over as the AMS advisor.

The UT Martin AMS student chapter is very active, and the program is growing, reflecting the interest in extreme weather held by the public as global climate change continues. The chapter annually attends the national AMS meeting and Wallace organized summer “storm chasing” excursions. AMS students are frequently invited to local classroom and civic groups for talks and weather demonstrations. AMS teams-

up with the GeoClub and SGE for some events, especially annual Earth Science Week events held at the Discovery Park of America. The chapter maintains a Facebook page that highlights Martin weather.

## ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN GEOSCIENTISTS

Historically, there has always been a high percentage of female geoscience graduates at UT Martin, often over 50%. In 2016, under the encouragement of lab instructor Eleanor Gardner, the women geologists petitioned to have a chapter of the Association of Women Geoscientists (AWG) established at UT Martin; however, the chapter went inactive soon after. In 2018, Angie Van Boening was hired at UT Martin and began efforts to reactive the chapter, which was reinstated in 2019 with Van Boening as the advisor (<https://www.awg.org/general/?type=chaptersutmartin>). AWG is the smallest of the student professional societies in the geoscience program at UT Martin. As most of the members, male and female, are also members of the other societies and groups, AWG nearly always cosponsors with them in activities (FIGURE 4).

## SUMMARY

Although the UT Martin geoscience program is relatively small, there is a strong legacy of student involvement in professional societies and clubs. The largest and oldest is the GeoClub, established in 1970 prior to the geology program being given degree-granting status. The program also has a strong chapter of the Sigma Gamma Epsilon, the Eta Alpha Chapter, in which all of the various societies and clubs within the geosciences program come together. Additional active programs include highly active student chapters of the American Meteorological Society and Association of Women Geoscientists.

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**FIGURE 4:** UT Martin student chapter of the Association of Women Geoscientists (AWG) advertising poster.

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