UCONN'S GEOLOGY DEPARTMENT WAS A DINOSAUR:

On Tuesday, the University of Connecticut took the enlightened step of abolishing its Department of Geology & Geophysics. Now we faculty can stretch our legs, recombine with other departments in new ways and more effectively serve the people of Connecticut, who deserve more than they had been getting for their tax dollars in geology education.

Were the university planning to do away with a discipline critical to our state, I would also be screaming. But it is not. We geologists still have our jobs. The geology major remains. New research is being published. Courses are being planned. A committee to map out our fate has already met.

Dissolution of geology departments is a modern trend in science these days. Dozens of universities, many with quality ratings higher than UConn's, have dropped the word "geology" from their titles, morphing into departments with more modern-sounding names, such as Earth and Planetary Sciences, Earth and Marine Sciences, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, Earth and Environmental Sciences, and so forth. Such a trend reflects the fact that geology is no longer a narrowly prescribed discipline devoted to the study of rocks, the search for oil and the avoiding of hazards. Instead, it has become something harder to see but actually more important. It has become the conceptual core of a much broader endeavor called "earth system science," one that treats the atmosphere, the oceans and ecosystems as one thing, rather than many. The mantra my students mumble is: "No rocks -- no ecosystems."

Consider, for example, the spectacular 1815 eruption of Tambora, in Indonesia. The traditional geological emphasis on this event would be on the details of the eruptive process, such as the amount of gas in the magma (molten rock). The newer emphasis would connect the gloom and doom of the 1818 novel "Frankenstein" to the lingering, climate-changing consequence of the far-away catastrophe a few years earlier. Both approaches are valid because all volcanoes begin with molten rock, and because all climates begin and end with geology.

More locally, consider Connecticut's beloved stone walls. The traditional emphasis would be to collect and study rocks from them, to harvest them as if they were outcrops. The newer emphasis would treat each wall as a library of time, one that tells the story of us all: lichen by lichen, stone by stone, pasture by pasture and suburb by suburb. Both approaches are valid because all stone walls are made of stone and because all earthly history begins and ends with geology.

The demise of the Department of Geology & Geophysics was, in my mind, inevitable. With declining revenues and the loss of several professors and staff positions due to recent retirements, we no longer had the resources to serve both traditional and modern approaches. I am thankful that the administration had the guts to do what had to be done, even if it brings with it temporary dislocation, anxiety, sadness and national shame.

What happened to our department is a familiar refrain in paleontology, the geological study of fossils. No group of creatures (especially a group of tenured faculty) ever willingly gives up its niche. Changes must always be imposed from the outside. Then, adaptation takes place. Evolution results. In fact, none of us would be concerned with this minor academic affair had the dinosaurs not gone extinct 65 million years ago, when a giant asteroid from outer space struck Mexico.

The geology crater at UConn comes from a university administration advised by an expert panel of outside reviewers with no grudges or conflicts of interest and whose own programs had already morphed into the modern era. On their advice, Dean Ross MacKinnon, Provost John Petersen and the board of trustees broke us up as if they were academic prospectors looking for useful gems inside of old and tarnished agates. I, for one, am grateful for their help.