On Geography and the American Liberal Arts College

As the AAG takes stock of its first century and looks forward to the next, I encourage its membership to consider its current position and future prospects within a small niche of the American higher education establishment, the liberal arts college.

Liberal arts colleges are distinctive institutions that are often poorly understood by the general public and by those within the discipline of geography. These mostly private schools specialize in undergraduate education characterized by small class size, intense faculty-student interaction, and significant attention to writing and analytical skill development. With only 3% of the U.S. college population attending liberal arts colleges, these institutions will forever have low visibility amongst most Americans.

The current makeup of American geography also limits stronger links between the discipline and liberal arts institutions. Geography in the U.S. is dominated by programs at large public universities and the majority of its practitioners have been trained at these institutions. More thought must be given to increasing our presence in the liberal arts college arena where the discipline is seriously under-represented.

Among the top twenty-seven national liberal arts colleges (as ranked by US News & World Report in 2003), only five have geography programs (Middlebury, Vassar, Colgate, Macalester, and Bucknell). Furthermore, most faculty at the top tier colleges have nothing but passing knowledge of geography as a discipline because they largely have been trained at institutions without geography programs. In some instances, faculty at these colleges question whether geography should even be considered a part of the traditional liberal arts curriculum.

So why should geography as a discipline be concerned about its station in the liberal arts college curriculum? For starters, the top-tier liberal arts colleges are highly selective institutions that often compete head to head with the Ivy League schools for the best students in the country. More important than prestige, however, is the fact that the top liberal arts colleges produce a disproportionate number of the graduate students in the country. Geography as a discipline will only benefit if it increasingly can attract high quality students to its graduate programs.

Increasing the presence of geography within the liberal arts curriculum will mean exploiting current opportunities and overcoming existing obstacles. The opportunity is that there is a great deal of interest among students at liberal arts colleges in thematic areas that geographers are adept at studying, such as environmental, international, area, and urban studies. The main challenge is that the discipline lacks exposure among liberal arts college administrators and faculty who might be in a position to bring a geographer on board or initiate a new department or joint program. To this end, I suggest three strategies that geography as a discipline could undertake to improve its position within the liberal arts college establishment.

First, given that geography is poorly understood by most liberal arts college faculty, the discipline needs to find creative ways of gaining exposure to this potential constituency. As an example, I note that Macalester and Gustavus Adolphus Colleges used funds from the AAG’s Visiting Geographical Scientist Program (VGSP) to bring the then president of the AAG Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group, Paul Robbins of Ohio State University, to our campuses last fall. In addition to addressing our students, Robbins was the keynote speaker at a workshop for over twenty faculty from eight of the top liberal arts colleges in the Midwest, six of whom have no geography programs. As the interdisciplinary subfield of political ecology was the subject of the encounter (a realm in which geography has been an intellectual leader), the discipline had a chance to shine. This is a small example, but such exchanges should be supported by the AAG whenever possible. The VGSP could also begin to support the visits of prominent geographers to schools that have no existing geography programs. Furthermore, the AAG should work to get prominent geographers on the Phi Beta Kappa lecture series (a prestigious opportunity for outreach to non-geographers).

Second, should there be sufficient demand for a geographer, a geography department or a joint department shared with another discipline at a strategically significant liberal arts college, the AAG should consider how it might help leverage external funding to help start up such initiatives. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this may mean investing in prestigious (often wealthy) schools that have the resources for sustained program expansion.

Third, rather than viewing liberal arts college positions as second rate choices, the discipline should encourage its best and brightest Ph.D. candidates to seriously consider such opportunities when they do become available. The best of these schools offer teaching loads that are only slightly higher than those at the large research universities, salaries that are very competitive, students who are often highly motivated, exceptionally bright and eager to engage with faculty, and relatively generous internal funding for research.

I suggest that current liberal arts college geographers and the AAG leadership meet in the near future to draft a strategic plan for strengthening the presence of geography in the liberal arts college curriculum. Such an objective, if attained, will further strengthen the discipline’s pool of graduate students, not to mention its future scholarship and teaching.

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