Diversity in the Geographic Workforce

Notes from the panel discussion at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

February 26, 2012 ✦ New York, New York

Panelists: Amy Blatt, Quest Diagnostics; Darryl Cohen, U.S. Census Bureau; Dennis Davidson, San Diego State University and University of California, Santa Barbara; Paisly Di Bianca, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Rebecca Haacker-Santos, University Corporation for Atmospheric Research; Heather R. Houlton, American Geosciences Institute

Moderator: Darryl Cohen, U.S. Census Bureau

What does diversity mean in today’s workforce?
- As of 2011, 30 percent of the U.S. population is composed of underrepresented minorities; by 2050, that number is expected to grow to 45 percent
- Diversity within agencies, organizations, and industries varies
  - Because the Census Bureau’s customer base is the entire American public, it is very broad and diverse, allowing the agency to better address the concerns of a diverse public
  - Diversity is very important in climate change research, because a “single stream” perspective means that important research areas can be neglected; for example, some of the socio-cultural impacts of Hurricane Katrina might have been mitigated if research on potential impacts of severe storms had integrated more diverse perspectives
  - Astronomy and astrophysics have connections to all cultures; however, there are fewer than ten African Americans in this profession in the U.S.
- The emergence of feminist geography allows for a broader perspective in terms of diversity
- When employees have colleagues who look like them, diversity can create real personal connections

How can employers attract a diverse workforce?
- In many ways, this problem is still being worked out; there are many persistent difficulties when it comes to attracting diverse students and employees
- The geosciences get a “bad rap” among some groups so these fields are generally not seen as attractive career paths for underrepresented groups
  - One solution might be to start recruiting students earlier in their educations
- In order to attain a diverse workforce, employers must be proactive in developing outreach and other resources
  - Strong mentoring programs could be developed in order to give newcomers someone to talk to about various issues
  - The federal government generally does a good job at attracting diverse workers; therefore, it could be a potential model for other sectors
- Geographers need to do a better job of paying attention to the messages we put out into the world and how we present ourselves as a discipline (for example, brochures typically feature field workers as a bunch of athletic white men)
- Diversity needs to be planned and promoted; otherwise, things are unlikely to change on their own

Notes compiled by Mark Revell, Association of American Geographers
Available online at: www.aag.org/careers
Are employers and educators meeting the needs of diverse students?

- Some strides have been made with African Americans and Latinos ("low-hanging fruit")
- There is a large number of emerging “third culture” students in the U.S., whose parents are from a different country than they are
  - These students tend to feel very isolated because of their unique backgrounds
  - There is currently very little outreach to these students at the university level
- Veterans and “non-traditional” students are groups that receive insufficient attention
- Online learning programs have “huge potential” for reaching underrepresented groups
- Simply talking to students can make a big difference -- letting them know you’re there for them if they have any concerns is very important

What trends can we expect to see over the next 10 years?

- The ability to communicate in multiple languages is likely to be an important trend
  - As China, India, and other rising powers start contributing more ideas, it will be imperative that geographers learn their languages in order to communicate and “meet them halfway”; contrary to popular belief, “everyone does not speak English!”
- In many fields, women are now the predominant gender
- Over the last 30 years, the proportion of female faculty has grown from 5 to 20 percent, signaling a positive trend.
  - However, over the same period, the share of minority faculty has only grown from 3 percent to 5 percent
- The many economic problems facing the U.S. will only be solved by inviting groups from disparate backgrounds to help develop solutions