

Supporting Early Career Geographers Beyond the Academy

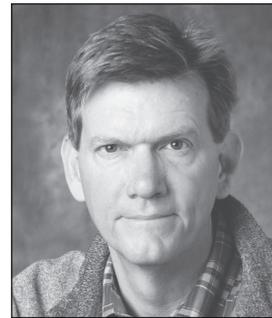
Several of my columns have focused on improving support for early career geographers moving into academic careers. Just as much attention should focus on strengthening support for those moving into professional careers in business, government, NGOs and other types of non-profits.

As a discipline we've had a long history of providing the training needed for our graduates to move into leadership positions in a wide range of careers. But improving and extending this support is, I think, particularly important now given changing economic realities and opportunities. Despite the current economic downturn, a study in *The Professional Geographer* by Michael Solem, Ivan Cheung and Beth Schlemper (2008) indicates that career prospects remain strong for geography graduates. However, they also note that employment opportunities are increasingly diverse and often require additional skills or a different combination of skills and competencies than in the past. We know that geospatial career opportunities are among the fastest growing in the U.S., but geographers continue to be valued for other qualities they bring to their work: experience in field and research methods; the ability to work across disciplinary boundaries, and spatial thinking. Improving our undergraduate and graduate curricula to address new challenges may not require radical change. Raising awareness of the issues and spurring cooperation and collaboration across the discipline may be more fruitful.

For instance, several recent studies by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education at the University of Washington have asked doctoral graduates to reflect on their training five to ten years after completing their degrees (<http://depts.washington.edu/cirgweb/c/>). Respondents (including geographers) who had moved into academic positions as well as into careers in business, government and the non-profit sectors rated their training highly, but had suggestions for change. Most respondents—particularly those from outside academia—wanted even greater exposure and focus on research methods, grant writing, communication

and other areas that are already part of most graduate curricula. Despite these suggestions for change, other studies indicate that many faculty don't appreciate the widening range of career paths being pursued by their students and see no reason to change their programs. As Donald Wulff and Maresi Nerad have noted in one recent book chapter on improving doctoral education, this means many "faculty continue to prepare their students as though all... are going to become faculty, while in reality only about half of all PhD recipients [across all fields] ultimately do so" (in geography about 70-75 percent). One consequence is that students may be hesitant to confide plans to their advisors if they are considering careers outside of a research university.

Although this particular example focuses on doctoral education, my point is that opportunities for geographers may be changing faster than both graduate and undergraduate programs can respond, leading to a mismatch between aspirations and education at all educational levels from BA to PhD. Raising awareness of the current employment situation among faculty is a start, but more can also be done to alert students to career possibilities. This is one reason the AAG is leading efforts to publish the book *Practicing Geography: Careers for Enhancing Society and the Environment* and to improve and expand the association's careers website. A major emphasis of both the book and website is to help students think broadly about career options and how they can engage important issues as leaders in government, business and the non-profit sector. I think the book will also alert students to the range of career options available and how they can get the most out of their undergraduate and graduate programs. But, at the same time, the book and website are also intended to help faculty respond to changing needs and help students make informed choices about their career options.



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In addition to raising awareness changing career opportunities, I think there is need to do more to share effective practice among geography programs. Many of our colleagues are attuned to the changes underway and are responding to student interests and concerns in very positive ways. They are developing innovative ways for students to gain the experience and knowledge needed for leadership and success. These strategies involve, among others, developing effective alumni networks, dynamic internship programs, relevant training in geospatial technologies, and careful advising. Too few of these strategies are however shared among departments and across the discipline. Sharing information about successful and unsuccessful strategies can be of tremendous value to colleagues.

Over the next few years, I hope the AAG's continuing Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education (EDGE) project (www.aag.org/edge) will help to promote this sharing on two levels. The first is the need for research. At the moment, there is great need for basic information about our MA/MS programs and how they are adapting to the changing career paths of graduates. Many disciplines, for instance, are developing professional masters programs, but how and to what extent are these being developed in geography and how are they working? Similarly, certifications are currently very popular, but what skills do they provide and how are students benefiting from them? The second way to share is through workshops and sessions at professional meetings, as well as through our annual AAG Department Leadership workshop. A number of sessions have already been planned for the AAG Annual Meeting in Seattle, but I hope these sessions will only be the start of further discussion on these important issues. ■

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