Beyond the Ivory Tower B: Preparing Geographers for Careers in Government & Nonprofits

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

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Panelists: Paul Frederic, Kennebec Valley Regional Waste Corporation; Robert Kerr, U.S. Air Force Culture and Language Center; Elizabeth (Liz) Lyon, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Richard (Rich) Quodomine, New York State Department of Transportation; Carolyn Roberts, Environmental Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Network; Lowry Taylor, U.S. Department of State; Rebecca Theobald, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs; John Wertman, Association of American Geographers

Moderators: Beth Schlemper, University of Toledo; Michael Solem, Association of American Geographers

What are some of the important trends in labor markets and industry that are likely to have an impact on the careers of geographers in the government and nonprofit sectors?

- The distinction between the public and nonprofit sectors is becoming increasingly blurred, so job hunters need to keep an entrepreneurial mindset
- As the world converges on a “broader, flatter economic plane,” interest in geospatial knowledge is increasing, and a broad, interdisciplinary perspective is going to be important in the coming years
- Getting your foot in the door in the federal government continues to be challenging
  - Although federal jobs are currently being cut, openings will still need to be filled as older workers retire
- While geographers are actually working in a lot of government positions across all kinds of fields, they are usually not coded as "geographers" in job descriptions (the Census Bureau is one major exception)
  - Searching for key words that describe your skill set can help you find jobs you are qualified for
- Economic and environmental issues are going to be increasingly important in the coming years.
  - While local, state, and federal governments might be shedding some employees because of the poor economy, there is still demand for employees who can deal with new economic and environmental problems
  - Many of these jobs are now outsourced to the private sector -- because the required skills are interchangeable, jobs seekers should not spend a lot of time worrying about which sector they will find employment in
- The military now has a “huge need” for geographic skills, as it is necessary to learn as much as possible about different regions to avoid conflict
  - “Total situational awareness” is an exciting trend that has led to more job openings for human geographers, even as budgets are scaled back (job titles include human terrain analyst and social scientist)
  - Job seekers should also consider looking at military subcontractors (such as Lockheed Martin and Booz Allen Hamilton) -- these companies are familiar with the skills geographers bring to the table and have a track record of hiring them

Notes compiled by Mark Revell, Association of American Geographers
Available online at: www.aag.org/careers
What skills, knowledge, and abilities are in demand within the government and nonprofit sectors?

- There is always a need for graduates who are curious, researchers who are “willing to explore,” and people who can listen
- Graduates need to be able to work in teams with people from different backgrounds and to shift their focus between large- and small-scale perspectives
- Problem-solving skills are essential
  - Graduates should remember that employers are, first and foremost, looking for people to solve problems
  - Multiple approaches (scientific, cultural, etc.) are necessary for solving the kinds of problems encountered in the workforce, so job seekers must be willing to learn new skills
- Written and verbal communication skills are “absolutely necessary” in today’s workforce
- Job seekers should stay abreast of new technology
- Graduates should embrace social media.
  - The federal government is just now “catching on,” but social media is expanding and it will likely play a large role in the future
  - Without social networking, it is hard to build connections; the worst that can happen is that someone will say “no” to a request
- Be persistent and be prepared to explain how your skills match what employers are looking for

How can academic departments improve the preparation of geography students with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they will need for a successful career in the government and nonprofit sectors?

- Academic departments need to do a better job of offering more real-world, applied projects; these types of projects can help students develop the specific skills employers need
  - It is essential that students learn to ask the “right” questions in research; if you are asking the wrong questions, your work will not matter
  - One skill that is persistently missing among geographers is the ability to conduct fieldwork – how to apply academic knowledge to real-world problems
- Graduates need learn how to be “evangelical geographers” and take an active role in advocating their skills to employers
  - Employers want graduates who feel empowered and are not afraid to say “I can do this!”
  - Students need to learn how to seek out opportunities, “make their own fortunes,” and be proactive in developing their careers
- All departments need to be able to connect their students with internships
  - Internships are extremely valuable, teaching two very important skills: 1) How to behave in an office environment and 2) workplace communication
  - In the “real world,” variables are always changing so employees have to learn how to be adaptable; internships provide opportunities to learn how to complete tasks that one has been delegated
- Departments need to focus on marketing their programs to people who want to go into fields closely related to geography