Beyond the Ivory Tower: Geography Careers in the Business, Government, and Nonprofit Sectors

Notes from the panel discussion at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Middle Atlantic Division of the AAG

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Panelists: Max Baber, U.S. Geospatial Intelligence Foundation; Seth Marcus, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; Rich Quodomine, New York State Department of Transportation; Jeremy Tasch, Towson University; Mike Ratcliffe, U.S. Census Bureau; Alex Stapleton, Towson University

Moderator: Joy K. Adams, 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, particularly within the Middle Atlantic region?

- The region’s outlook is robust for the geospatial industry. While many positions are not entry-level, the overall demand for qualified employees continues to outstrip the supply.
  - The geointelligence industry is not simply about supporting national defense, but about preparing for the future. Analysts are needed in the field to cover everything from climate change to human aid to natural disaster response and recovery.
- On the civilian side of the federal government, there are big budget cuts and a difficult job market, but the Middle Atlantic region is faring better than the rest of the country.
  - On average, there are currently 200-400 people applying for each open job; because of supply and demand, the government can pay less for these highly sought-after positions.
  - Agencies are gradually moving toward more of a place-based perspective. GIS is a maturing sector, and geographers and geographic training are needed to advance the production and interpretation of maps.
- There are fewer jobs currently available within state and local governments. Older workers are beginning to retire, but many positions are left unfilled due to budget constraints. However, GIS specialists remain in particularly high demand.
- The DC metro area is fantastic for NGO and nonprofit work. There is a massive turnover in these organizations, which means many job opportunities.
- Many employers are looking for GIS skills, but it can be hard for students to find the internships and entry-level positions that will get their feet in the door.

Given the trends we’ve just identified, what advice do you have for students and job seekers?

- Search broadly when looking for jobs.
  - Realize that most job descriptions will not have the word "geographer" in them. Read between the lines of job descriptions to identify how "place" pertains to the position.
  - Think creatively about your training and how it can be applied in the workplace.
- "Google yourself" to see how you present yourself online and if it might prevent you from getting a job. Employers will do research using social media to see what kind of person you are.
  - On the flip side, you can use the Internet to your advantage. Be active in professional blogs to build a digital presence.
• Understand and communicate the value of your training in geography.
  o Employers will hire people that fill their specific needs. Job seekers must be able to demonstrate the kinds of skills their background in geography gives them and articulate how these skills are useful and can be applied in a variety of circumstances.
  o Carry a portfolio of the types of projects you've worked on to show prospective employers what you can do.
  o When I was first looking for a job, I sent out a ton of resumes and cover letters to employers that looked like matches for my skills. Eventually, I got a bite by illuminating my skills in my resume and cover letter and by explaining to them how I could improve their organization.
  o In most professional settings, geographers are going to be a small minority among people from other academic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that geographers be able to communicate with coworkers who may be unfamiliar with geography in order to show them what they can do and how geography relates to their work.
  o Do background research on organizations that sound interesting and learn how you can apply your skills there. A lot of organizations don’t know they have a need for a geographer until you present your skills and show them what you can do.
  o Geographers are increasingly becoming project managers. Business courses are a good way to gain important project management skills to supplement your geography degree.

• Create opportunities. Focus on the steps you should take in order to get the kinds of positions you seek.
  o If you're an undergraduate student, begin by looking for internships or volunteer opportunities.
  o Employers say they want experience, but it is very difficult to get experience when no one is hiring. Be motivated, make connections, and form relationships with professors to maximize your opportunities.
  o Take time to have friends, network, and socialize with professionals who can potentially help you in your career. A lot of business and government jobs emphasize interpersonal relationships. Many times, social events are the places where business actually gets done. Hard skills are important, but the soft skills (such as interpersonal skills) can give you a distinct advantage to advance your career.
  o Be curious, whether as an intern or in a full-time position. No matter what the job is, having a curiosity about it will open doors. Be the person who says, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out.”

• Take opportunities as they come. Even if they are not quite what you want to do in the long term, you can learn valuable skills from them.

• Don't give up! Be persistent, find a passion, and pursue it.
  o Be patient and keep trying. You probably will get rejected the first few times you apply for jobs.
  o If an organization isn't currently hiring, don’t give up or lose contact. While an employer might not be hiring for a position at that specific moment, the hiring situation could easily change down the road.

• It’s never too early to get your information and resumes out. Timing is everything.
How can internships, work-based learning, applied geography curricula, and/or studying abroad help students get the professional skills needed for entering the workforce?

- Try lots of different things. Geography is a "big-picture" field. High GPA’s help, but ancillary experience and social skills are what make a complete, well-rounded applicant.
- I had several internships at a wide variety of places before I got my first job. You never know where your career will take you.
- Think about how to apply what you’ve learned to solve a problem. How can you prove to an interviewer that your skills will solve problems and add value to their organization? How can you help them be more efficient? Get creative with how you market yourself, and think broadly about how to link your coursework to an applied geography career.
- In making connections, think expansively. You know more about what you do as a geographer than non-geographers do.
- Skills in programming, scripting, and database use are always in high demand (e.g., Python, VBA, and other programming skills).
- Foreign language skills can be very useful in many NGO and nonprofit organizations.