Beyond the Ivory Tower A: Preparing Geographers for Business & Private Sector Careers

Notes from the panel discussion at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers
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Panelists: Amy Blatt, Quest Diagnostics; Kate Edwards, Englobe; Rob George, Rite Aid; Dave Miller, Walgreens

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

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 private sector?

• More and more private companies are beginning to jump on the location-based services bandwagon
  o The "spatialization" of information is huge in IT
  o The geography of the trade areas and of competitors' stores drives the retail business
  o In a weak economy, emphasis is on how to get more productivity out of existing store locations; retail is moving from "where do we put stores?" to "how do we contact the customer?" and "what should we sell in each store?"
  o Geography is now beginning to spread to category management, marketing, and other areas beyond traditional functions (e.g., real estate research)

• The "Great Recession" holds some unique opportunities for geographers, but also poses challenges for people entering the field
  o It is imperative for graduates to be able to communicate the value of their skills to a wide audience and articulate how geography is unique
  o There is a huge employment gap between the young and the old, with 54% of 18- to 24-year-olds unemployed

• Some organizations can be very compartmentalized or "siloed"
  o You might be able to create a niche for yourself as a geographer once inside an organization

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 private sector?

• Students should start early in their college career to plan for a career in business and pursue related coursework; prepare portfolios that will speak to employers

• Thinking of yourself as a "geographer" is an "old-school" approach; departments can encourage students to think in terms of being "cross-functional"
  o "Bringing things together is three to four times as powerful as the sum of their parts"
  o Courses that combine geography with other fields (such as business or economics) will better prepare graduates for careers in the private sector

• Job candidates need to "be salespeople" and "get themselves out there"; departments can help students to develop an entrepreneurial mindset

Notes compiled by Joy Adams and Mark Revell, Association of American Geographers
Available online at: www.aag.org/careers
• Job candidates need to be able to hear and decipher a business problem and then propose a solution
• The most important skill prospective business geographers should develop is data visualization; at the most basic level, all geographers should be able to create and present a coherent map
• Faculty members might lack the interest and/or ability to provide students with career preparation and professional development; workshops to help faculty develop these skills would be useful
• Additional outreach by academic departments to the private sector to convey the potential value of geography in organizations would be helpful
• Regional divisions should consider organizing career fairs during their annual meetings
• Ad-hoc solutions are helpful, but there also needs to be a change in structure:
  o Departments could appoint internship coordinators, hire businesspeople as adjunct faculty, and offer a "business track" in addition to the traditional "academic track" for majors
  o Alumni networks within departments could be formalized to introduce students to potential career paths
  o "Silos" within universities can be a challenge (e.g., perceptions of "treading on" another discipline's subject matter, not knowing whom to approach to discuss strategies)
    • Perhaps geography faculty could be "lent" to other departments to teach business geography courses?

What can be done to improve awareness and appreciation among employers of what geography offers and, in turn, why they should hire graduates from geography programs?
• The AAG could join forces with organizations that are more business-oriented
• More "top-down" outreach is needed (to CEOs and other executives), in addition to bottom-up outreach
  o Many employers don't fully understand what geography is, but they like it when they see it
• Most companies have a basic awareness of GIS technology, but geographers must convey the point that they have a deeper understanding of the geographic principles behind the technology than other users
• Job descriptions can be constrained in such a way that qualified applicants might be eliminated early in the hiring process; networking is very important to help candidates get past the initial screening
  o In networking, the quality of contacts and interactions trumps quantity