Report Assesses Progress of Early Career Geography PhDs

Each year, about 200 geography PhDs enter the job market. What happens to them and how well did graduate school prepare them for their careers? What do they see as the strengths and weaknesses of their academic preparation? Perhaps most tellingly, if given the chance would these early career PhDs choose to pursue doctoral degrees in geography all over again?

These and related questions are answered in a recent in-depth study of social science career paths conducted by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), a research center at the University of Washington Graduate School and College of Education. With Ford Foundation support, CIRGE produced Social Science PhDs—Five+ Years Out, a national study of more than 3,000 doctorate holders in anthropology, communication, geography, history, political science and sociology who received their PhDs between 1995 and 1999.

Surveyed during academic year 2005-06, respondents listed post-PhD jobs, evaluated their graduate programs, and provided relationship and family history from the beginning of their PhD studies to the date surveyed. Findings about geographers' careers in relation to their doctoral education, including the advice graduates have for PhD programs and current students, are

Nevada’s Springtime Landscapes Ideal for Geography Field Trips

You will probably see this popular bumper sticker while in Las Vegas for the 2009 AAG Annual Meeting: “Nevada is Not a Wasteland.” Created in response to ubiquitous images of the Yucca Mountain Nuclear waste facility, the Nevada Test Site, and many people's impressions of deserts as vast tracts of emptiness, the message attempts to point out that Nevada is full of natural beauty and remarkable landscapes.

Wildlife Beyond The Strip

The Mojave Desert, in which Las Vegas sits, is home to over 2,500 plant and animal species, many of which are rare and/or endemic (species known only to a certain area). Nevada is sixth in the nation in the total number of endemic plant and animal species. In fact, in favorable wet years the Mojave supports more endemic plants per square mile than any other location in the United States.

What few may realize is that arid environments are not all the same. The Mojave Desert offers a wide diversity of arid environments from salt flats
Examined in CIRGE’s report *Careers of Geography PhDs* (available at www.cirge.washington.edu).

Despite their speediness, geographers published more during graduate school, with 2/3 geographers having at least one peer-reviewed article published or in press at the time of PhD award compared to only half of respondents in the other disciplines. (Sociologists’ productivity equaled that of geographers, but they spent more time in graduate school.)

Geographers’ evaluation of their PhD education identified strength in key dimensions of academic rigor, financial support, and socializing students into the academic community. However, many strongly recommended that programs offer more support for career preparation. For instance, one respondent advised programs to “consider adding a course that would prepare students for their first academic (assistant professor) position.” Another suggested that “established academics need to work on building and maintaining networks with non-academics … pragmatically, jobs [for students] come from such networks.”

Geographers’ ratings of the importance of particular skills vs. the quality of training (formal or informal) in these skills during their PhD programs identified areas needing more training, including: grant writing, writing and publishing reports and articles, and collaboration and team work.

Employers of geographers both inside and outside of academia seem to share these views: in an in-depth investigation of geographers’ competencies conducted by the AAG’s EDGE project, employers identified similar skills as being needed in geographers’ work, but not being mastered consistently by geography graduates.1

Furthermore, a common theme in open-ended comments was the need for training in how to teach. These findings mirror those of the AAG’s EDGE and GFDA projects, which recently produced two books, *Aspiring Academics and Teaching College Geography*, to provide current graduate students and early career faculty with research-informed advice on topics and skills that are often not part of the graduate curriculum2 (www.aag.org/edge/edge_materials.cfm).

Nevertheless, by and large, geographers are pleased that they pursued a PhD: 78% reported they would still get a PhD in the same field and subfield if they had it to do over again, and only 10% felt they would not get a PhD at all. However, to ensure greater success for their students, these graduates advise programs to encourage and guide students to publish, network, and present their work at conferences as much as possible while still in graduate school. They also urge programs to provide training in communication, team work, and management skills needed for careers in business, government, and non-profit sectors.

More findings about geographers’ job satisfaction, work and family conflicts, and a closer look at multiple dimensions of PhD program quality can be found in *Careers of Geography PhDs*, available at www.cirge.washington.edu. Contact Elizabeth Rudd, CIRGE Senior Research Scientist, at erudd@u.washington.edu.

Elizabeth Rudd
University of Washington, Seattle

Victoria Babbit
University of Washington, Seattle
