Working Abroad: International Job Opportunities for Geographers

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

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Panelists: Sives Govender, EIS-Africa; Niem Huynh, Association of American Geographers; Linda McDowell, University of Oxford; Yu (Aloe) Rioux, University of Massachusetts, Lowell; Lowry Taylor, U.S. Department of State; Carmen Tedesco, Development Alternatives, Inc.

Moderator: Janice Monk, University of Arizona

How does one break into and/or choose to pursue an international career?

- Internships, visiting instructor positions, or fellowships overseas
- Many people who work in international development served in the Peace Corps
- Prior international travel experience
- Family connections
  - Some panelists have immediate family or other relatives who have had diplomatic or international careers
  - Some geographers come to the U.S. from abroad (or vice versa) to be near family/friends/partners
- Career opportunities vary spatially
  - Markets for certain positions/specialties or educational opportunities might be better in the U.S. than in other countries (or vice versa)
  - "Border crossings" also occur within countries (i.e., regional relocations)

How critical is language proficiency to working internationally?

- Language issues can be difficult, especially when traveling between many different countries
- Technology is something of a "universal language"; however, translation can be frustrating
- Language differences can be a challenge even within the Anglosphere
  - Dialectical differences can be confusing (e.g., differences in Canadian, British, and American terminology)
  - Business communication styles may differ -- for example, in the UK, applicants are less boastful on applications and in presentations than they are U.S. and "plain is better than fancy"

How can I find out about job opportunities in different countries?

- The Department of Commerce maintains a guide to American companies by country
- For opportunities in Africa, check out ReliefWeb and EIS-Africa
What advice do you have for geographers considering international work?

- Skype and other technologies can help with discussing and exploring opportunities and options in advance.
- If you have a career in which you move from place to place, take what you learn in each assignment with you to the next one.
- Use your networks -- people with backgrounds in geography often look to hire other geographers because they are aware of the skills and perspectives they have to offer.
- Negotiation and communication skills are especially important when working across cultures -- it is important to show respect for other cultures.
- Stay open to unexpected opportunities -- “You don’t always know where you’re going until you get there.”
- If you are a graduate student with an international graduate committee, maintain transparent communication -- consider periodic phone or Skype calls to stay in contact.
- New cultural settings and language differences can be challenging.
  - It is important to be adaptable, have patience, and carry on.
  - Some settings and situations can be particularly challenging for young women -- develop the ability to be politely assertive when necessary.
  - Despite the challenges, building relationships with people and working across countries has been an overall positive experience for many panelists.
- Obtaining a visa is an important element of working in another country.
- In some positions, employees “continent-hop” on frequent short-term assignments.
  - Always look at *Lonely Planet* guides for a “crash course” on modern history, how to dress, what vaccines you should get, etc. before travelling to a new country/region.
  - Balancing family and travel can be challenging -- relationships with family, partners, and children are things to consider when choosing short-term versus long-term work assignments; consider whether you will have the flexibility to say “no” to some assignments.

What are the most rewarding aspects of working abroad?

- Opening windows to a whole new world, understanding different kinds of perspectives, and gaining new friends.
- The presence of international students, faculty, and researchers fosters the globalization of education.
- Challenging conventional practices and changing the culture of the host country.
- Opportunities for lifelong learning.
- Making a difference in people’s lives and what is happening in the world today.