

Bridging Our Differences

In my February column I argued that we spend too much time worrying about the diversity of things under geography's umbrella, and should focus instead on the importance and value of the perspectives that unite us. A corollary to this thesis is that we are poorly served if the discipline becomes so disjointed that we cannot learn from one another. Yet in an age of topical specialization and theoretical diversification, it is not easy to avoid this pitfall.

Like any discipline, geography has a history replete with tensions among those with different interests and orientations. Tensions can be creative and productive, but they can also reflect narrow-mindedness and insularity. If our differences are to work for us rather than against us, the community of geographers needs to promote both a breadth of understanding and a culture of openness and dialogue. Rising to this challenge requires thinking holistically about what we are doing in everything from our graduate programs to our professional encounters.

The demands of "getting up to speed" in different parts of the discipline are so great these days that it is tempting simply to channel graduate students into narrowly based programs of study. Yet we are not just training students to do a particular project; we are facilitating careers in a multifaceted discipline that will inevitably evolve and change. Under the circumstances, shouldn't we make sure that the drive toward depth is complemented by a concern with breadth? Students who have been encouraged to develop some competence across geography's topical and theoretical divides are not only better prepared to play a constructive role in geography's future; they are much less likely to dismiss what is going on in other parts of the discipline.

After we leave graduate school, many of our professional encounters as geographers

are with like-minded colleagues. This is necessary and appropriate, but not to the point where it becomes inward-looking and divisive. To avoid becoming an overly compartmentalized discipline, we need to seize opportunities for cross-disciplinary dialogue. The annual AAG meeting presents one of these opportunities, yet I worry that we sometimes come away from those meetings feeling as if we had attended a large, simultaneous gathering of 30-odd specialty groups rather than a meeting of 4,000-odd geographers.

As this year's president, I have sought to address this issue in part through the centennial plenary sessions that will cap each day. In working with the Council to plan these sessions, I have sought to create a stronger sense of common experience for meeting attendees and to bring individuals from different corners of the discipline into dialogue with one another. I commend these sessions to you. They offer us the chance to hear provocative insights from geographers with diverse specialties and approaches. They will give us something to contemplate collectively for some time to come.

Efforts to bridge the divides in our discipline should not be limited to our annual meeting, however. We should promote more cross-cutting scholarship in our journals; we should foster opportunities for interaction and collaboration among discrete branches of our discipline; and we should talk to one another about our work. Above all, we should remember to ask what we can learn from one another before rushing to condemn what we consider to be wrong with another person's approach to geography.

Any of this can be taken too far, of course. We would be ill served

by suppressing our critical instincts as scholars, and we certainly do not want to promote a culture where disagreement becomes difficult or risky. Yet we can channel our differences in positive rather than negative directions if we have the background and inclination to understand the approaches of a range of geographers and if we keep our differences on a professional, rather than a personal, level.

It is abundantly clear that no single approach has all the answers to the myriads of questions geographers can and should pose. Against this backdrop, I find it depressing when I hear someone bragging about not using a map (as if anyone who did use one

must be simple minded) or when someone dismisses social theory as nothing more than verbal calisthenics. To take such positions is to suggest, on the one hand, that nothing of importance can be learned through geospatial analysis or, on the other hand, that anything which cannot be counted and given a coordinate is irrelevant and that serious theoretical-cum-philosophical contemplation has no place in our discipline. Both positions seem to be patently absurd.

I would challenge us to use our grand centennial gathering in Philadelphia not just to renew acquaintances with the like-minded and like-interested. Let us also take this opportunity to consider the synergies among different parts of our discipline and the links that bind the geographic enterprise. What a promising way this would be to launch the second century of the Association of American Geographers! ■



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