

Pathways to Geography

This marks my final column as AAG President and I must say it has been both fun and challenging to reflect upon what would be best to communicate each month to the general membership through the *AAG Newsletter*. This also marks the transition to my role as immediate Past President, and in that position, my difficult task of beginning to reflect upon what would be most appropriate as a theme for the Past President's address I will give at our association's Centennial Meeting in Philadelphia. The Centennial Meeting, which has been in the planning stages for some time, promises to be outstanding, and will be celebrated through special events, sessions, and publications, many of which will reflect on the pathways the Association and the discipline have taken over the last one hundred years. In my address, I hope to explore some of the pathways we might follow in our future.

I have reflected at various times throughout my career about the pathways I followed toward becoming a geographer, and the evolution of my ideas through experiences with professional colleagues and as a geographer in the field.

Like many, when I left the place of my youth (northwestern Montana) I didn't go to college with thoughts of becoming a geographer. I had always enjoyed geography, but it wasn't until I met my future wife, Ruth (who was already a geography major—she actually started as a freshman geography major!), that I began to realize how much being a geographer fit my broad interests, especially those relative to the environment and travel. It also provided an opportunity to explore and continually learn about new areas and how complex phenomena fit together on earth.

I was hooked when professors like Joe Ashley, Jim Edie, and Bob Taylor at Montana State University demonstrated a passion for geography and a sense of student-centeredness that allowed me to blossom as a young geographer. Ashley, as my undergraduate advisor, introduced me to the many opportunities geography

offers and exposed me to a broad-based education that has served me well throughout my life.

I then had the good fortune to go to Oregon State University where I was influenced by Richard Highsmith, James Lahey, Granville Jensen, Gordon Matzke, Keith Muckleston, Jon Kimerling, Chuck Rosenfeld, Jim Pease, Bob Frenkel, and Mary Lou Nolan. I also learned a great deal from my graduate student contemporaries, people like Steve Walsh, Owen Furuseeth, Dick Marsten, and Bill Hamilton, among others.

From there I went to Kansas State University, where I began what I thought would be a three to four year beginning faculty appointment that turned into a 17 year commitment in which my colleagues and I were able to build a strong geography department that eventually gained approval for a new Ph.D. program. During that time, and throughout my career, I also gained from the good fortune of supervising 34 graduate students and watching them as they have impacted society in various ways.

When I considered moving to a new university, it was important to me that they had a solid geography program, and I found that at West Virginia University. Geography at WVU was recognized for its quality and was developing a new Ph.D. program. It had also secured the statewide GIS Center. And, although I am now a dean at West Virginia University, with broad responsibilities for a large college of arts and sciences, I still have a passion and excitement for geography that has been with me since I first discovered the discipline.

I am sure there are thousands of unique stories as to how we each found geography. Many include the impact individuals have had in leading us to geography, often in introductory level



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geography courses. With the historical transitions that have occurred in many departments and universities, we must not lose site of the importance of linking our best geography faculty with students who are discovering the discipline in a world regional geography or introductory physical geography course. Some of these courses also include

future K-12 teachers, whose ideas about geography will be formulated in these courses. As universities have put ever increasing emphasis on extramural funding and refereed journal publications, we must not forget the importance of remaining student-centered and recruiting or encouraging students to consider studying geography as an exciting pathway for their careers. Further, we must do what we can to encourage students from diverse backgrounds to consider geography as a major. Although we have made significant progress in enhancing the status of women in geography, we have much work to do in enhancing racial diversity within our discipline. To address this, the AAG Council approved the creation of a task force to develop strategies for enhancing racial diversity within our membership and the discipline.

The strength of our association lies in the efforts and quality of our membership. I appreciate the opportunities presented to me through the presidency, and the opportunity I've had to work with a large number of our members as well as the other leaders of the Association and the Meridian Place office team. I am encouraged that our future as an association and a discipline looks bright through the efforts of so many. As AAG President, I was fortunate to have had this experience. For that, I thank you. ■

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