

Building Scholarly Bridges in a Fearful World

I write this column at a time when anxiety about and restrictions to international travel have ratcheted up considerably. The U.S. State Department's "Current Travel Warnings" website (<http://travel.state.gov/travel>) lists thirty countries that Americans should avoid, the vast majority of which are developing countries. Such an environment presents formidable challenges to the work of internationalization as access to field sites becomes difficult or impossible and travel overseas for conferences or study abroad becomes more risky. The greatest danger of all, however, is that we begin to internalize a fearful view of the world and in the process forget that the "dangerous countries" out there also harbor scholars and rich disciplinary traditions! The importance of recognizing our deep common roots as geographers and building and nurturing scholarly interactions across borders has never been more important than now, when other forms of positive engagement and discourse seem to be collapsing.

These reflections, to a great extent, are sparked by a memorable visit I made last year to the Department of Geography at Karachi University in Pakistan at the invitation of their department chair, Dr. Jamil Kazmi. Visits of senior scholars from the west are not everyday events and the names of these geographers are etched in departmental history: George Cressy (1948), Dudley Stamp (1955), Robert Platt (1966). I experienced enormous warmth and hospitality during my stay. There is a deep desire to interact with American scholars; that I was elected officer of the AAG gave my visit added weight in their eyes.

Visits of western scholars occasion campus-wide lectures that draw large audiences and media coverage. At Dr. Kazmi's request, I focused my presentation on the trends in American geography since 9/11. Although the scope of this work is enormous, I spoke about the research by GIS experts that focuses on

technology and physical infrastructure, the work of political geographers on the post 9/11 reshaping of the geography of international power and politics, and the studies of the impacts of 9/11 on the daily lives of individuals and groups. Not surprisingly, there was enormous interest in and sensitivity about how Americans view Pakistan and other Islamic countries. During the lively question and answer period, I was peppered with questions and comments about U.S. international policy. Although many were beyond the scope of my lecture, I sensed that audience members were appreciative just to have the chance to express their views to an American visitor who understood the context of their comments.

Over and over I met faculty and graduate students who were excited and energized about their research, committed to the instructional mission of the department, and undaunted by the severe resource limitations affecting their work. Imagine having to stay on top of your research with very limited access to journals, without a personal desktop computer with instant Internet access, and without the ability to attend conferences that bring together leading scholars in your field! It is no wonder that visits of international academics become so important, and why there is a great eagerness to build connections with American geographers.

I returned from Pakistan with a heightened awareness of the rich possibilities for building links with geographers at Karachi University and universities in other developing countries. These connections are not difficult to forge and have the potential to make an enormous impact. Here are just a few of the many ways that you can make a difference:

It may seem trivial, but if you receive an email query or request from an overseas scholar, take a moment to send a reply.

Even a brief acknowledgement will mean a lot to the recipient. If appropriate, send a copy of a recent paper or the link to a website of interest.

If your research involves international sites, seek to identify local collaborators. These scholars often are intimately familiar with the site and have detailed historical data. Their field knowledge combined with your familiarity with current literature and experience in publishing/grant writing will make for a formidable partnership.

When traveling overseas, make an effort to contact the geography department in the region you are visiting. Chances are that there will be considerable interest in having you visit the campus and make a presentation.

Establish a "sister department" relationship with a geography department in a third world country. This department could be the grateful beneficiary of back issues of journals, surplus books, and laboratory equipment no longer in use. (Donors interested in internationalization may be able to defray the cost of shipping.) Explore opportunities for scholarly and student exchanges with your sister department.

Despite all we hear about galloping globalization, the work of true internationalization demands effort and nurturing. This is particularly true in a world environment characterized by growing apprehension and fear toward a growing number of countries. At such a time, regardless of our politics, we need to keep doors open to geographers everywhere by focusing on our common excitement about and commitment to our discipline. There is little to lose and a world to gain. ■



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