

Stepping into the Future

Geography's position in the academe and society has strengthened dramatically over the past decade. Today, we are a far cry from the discipline that had to fight to justify its existence on college campuses in the 1970s and 1980s. In order for us to represent this invigorated discipline to our university administration and society at large, it is crucial that we first change how we represent the discipline to ourselves. In particular, we need to shed the defensive "circle the wagons" attitude that we adopted during the discipline's difficult decades and replace it with another that is confident and forward looking.

Evidence of our strengthened position is seen on many fronts. In 2003-04, very quietly and without much fanfare, we set a new record for the number of geography undergraduate degrees conferred in U.S. colleges and universities. The new mark of 4,564 broke the highs established during the previous two peaks in our history, in 1972 and 1994. More and more students are now entering universities with the declared objective to major in geography rather than stumbling on the major by accident in their sophomore or junior year.

There has also been a remarkable expansion of geography programs in recent years. In the four years that I have served on the AAG Council, the steady stream of reports about the start up of new geography programs have far outnumbered the stories of programs or departments closing down. The establishment of the Center for Geographical Analysis at Harvard University earlier this year was a particularly significant affirmation of the position of geography in the United States and has the potential to stimulate geography's resurgence in the country's liberal arts colleges. An article by Past AAG President Alec Murphy titled, "Geography's Place in Higher Education in the United States" (forthcoming in the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*) provides convincing documentation of the growth in U.S. geography programs over the past fifteen years, and should be required reading for all geographers.

Yet another significant change that I have observed over the past several years is the growing number of geographers working in interdisciplinary centers on campus. As supporting evidence consider this: in the early 1980s, few if any geography departments reported any adjunct/affiliated faculty in their listings in the *AAG Guide to Departments*. Today, the entry for almost every geography department lists faculty from other departments and centers that have courtesy or adjunct appointments in the department. What this means is that a larger community of scholars is being exposed to and is engaging in geographic scholarship, and geographers are building vital research and instructional connections across the campus.

Despite the mounting evidence of geography's growing strength, many of us have not fully shed the ingrained defensive postures we developed when geography was embattled and under siege. These, unfortunately, serve only to hold us back in today's environment. For example:

The dean just does not understand geography. This is often an automatic refrain when we do not receive the resources we need or feel we deserve. The problem is that this position can sometimes prevent us from undertaking a careful assessment of just how well we are serving the missions of our colleges and universities. It is also builds on the implicit assumption that other departments in the college are competitors rather than strategic collaborators.

While we continue to educate the higher administration about the relevance of geography and publicize our successes, we should also be willing to acknowledge that there may be other strong programs in our colleges. Instead of regarding other units only as competitors let's take the lead in exploring ways to collaborate and share resources for mutual benefit. Indeed, from a dean's point of view, the most persuasive case for directing resources to a particular

department is often made by the chair of another department.

They (scholars in other disciplines) are encroaching on our turf. As geographers, we are often very sensitive when non-geographers receive attention for what we view as purely geographic research. The underlying fear, of course, is that if others start working with geographic concepts and ideas, we will somehow be rendered irrelevant.

Yet the big, complex, social, and environmental problems of our day require geographers to work collaboratively with scholars from other fields, often blurring disciplinary boundaries. As we become more central players in intellectual debates such as those on global climate change, sustainable development, and human

rights, it should not alarm us that ideas and methods emanating out of geography are generating interest in other disciplines. Instead of fretting about others encroaching our boundaries, let's regard the proliferation of geographic ideas as a validation of our work. And let's continue to look outward instead of inward as we look to the future of our discipline.

In March 1983, Pierce Lewis began his presidential column in the *AAG Newsletter* with the statement, "Professional geography today is a far cry from what it was just a short time ago." Whereas Lewis was referring to the severe institutional setbacks and unfavorable press coverage experienced by geography at that time, today the same statement could be used to speak to the extraordinary growth and resurgence of geography's position. Let's make sure that our discourse and practices emanate not from the difficult years of geography's past but from the vigorous and positive trends of today. It is time now to step out confidently into geography's exciting future. ■



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