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Bringing Geography Back to Harvard

I am extremely pleased to announce that geography is returning to Harvard. After more than three years of study and effort by many supporters, including the AAG, Harvard University has approved the establishment of a new Center for Geographic Analysis (CGA).

In a formal public announcement on October 20, 2005, Peter K. Bol, Harvard College Professor and the Charles H. Carswell Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, was named the first Director of the Harvard University Center for Geographic Analysis. Peter, who has worked closely with the AAG during the establishment of the new Center, said his "aim

is to see the Center assist in research projects and teaching university-wide. During the last two decades the miniaturization of computer technology, the ability to carry out continuous-time monitoring, the use of GPS, the increased use of remote sensing, and growing sophistication of geographic information systems have made geospatial analysis a tool of tremendous value to the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences and to the professions. But spatial analysis is not only a technology; it is a way of thinking about the relationships between things. It is not only a research tool; it can be part of an undergraduate education. I foresee a vibrant future for the Center."

Bol, a distinguished historian who also directs the China Historical Geographic Information System project which spans Chinese history from 222 BC to 1911 AD, added that, "Today researchers across the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences are coming to recognize that geographic analysis can provide a common foundation for the integration of disciplinary knowledge about the earth and its climate, the evolution of its flora and

fauna, and the comparatively recent but extraordinary consequential development of human societies. This vision is at the heart of the CGA's mission in the university...

Geographic information sciences bridge earth and planetary sciences, engineering, medicine and public health, sociology, law, political science and economics, and

history and the humanities.

The interest at Harvard in geospatial analysis, spatial modeling, spatial statistics, and geographic information systems (GIS)—which has been the foundation for the development of spatial analysis generally—has been growing quickly."

Harvard's announcement noted that modeling the

world computationally is a thorny problem for researchers across Harvard. Today more than twenty research projects at the Harvard School of Public Health depend on spatial analysis, all students in the Graduate School of Design are taught basic techniques in the field, and in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences geographic modeling is an essential technology in various disciplines.

The Center for Geographic Analysis was founded with the support of the university at the highest levels, including Harvard Provost Steven E. Hyman, who formed the "Provost's Committee on Spatial Analysis," an exploratory group with which I and others at the AAG have worked closely. Chaired by Peter Bol, this planning effort was truly university wide and interdisciplinary. Among the disciplines at Harvard involved with the committee were history, landscape architecture, political science, statistics, physiology, geology, environmental health, astrophysics, sociology, computer science, art history, library science, environmental engineering, English,

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economics, anthropology, law, and geophysics.

In 2003, members of the committee issued a "Report to the Provost on Spatial Analysis at Harvard University," in which they concluded that "We are entering an era that will see the integration of spatial data and spatial analysis into the study of society and culture and the physical and life sciences. Advances in fields such as quantitative geography, computational spatial analysis, remote sensing and computer graphics have propelled the development of new research tools to meet the needs of the earth and planetary sciences, medicine, health, design, and history (to identify a few fields) to visualize, synthesize, and analyze data. As a result, scholars and students are learning to apply analytic and descriptive tools of spatial analysis in ways that were not possible in the past. In the process they are discovering that the techniques for mapping the inside of the earth also apply to mapping the inside of the brain, that an historical spatial database of a region serves both art historians and demographers. The interest at Harvard in spatial analysis and geographic information systems (GIS)—which has been the foundation for the development of spatial analysis—has started to grow quickly."

The prescient 2003 report to Harvard's Provost also recalled that "Our current state of affairs has its roots in 1948 when, before the appearance of quantitative

geography, President Conant decided to discontinue the study of geography at Harvard. As a result, some aspects of physical geography were left to the Geology Department to teach (where they are still taught), but the rising field of social science geography was discontinued. As a result, Harvard missed the development of quantitative geography, geospatial analysis, and geo-informatics. The sorts of courses that one might expect a geography department to provide cannot be found at Harvard: geographic data analysis, behavioral geography, economic geography, urban geography, mapping, spatial modeling, remote sensing, etc." and that, "Harvard's [current] situation is complex...there is a growing interest among students and faculty in spatial analysis but...there are no established means for offering instruction in quantitative geography or spatial analysis...[and] It is worth noting that courses in spatial analysis and GIS labs are common at publicly funded universities. There is a growing demand for graduates with GIS skills and the NSF funding for applied and theoretical work in spatial analysis is increasing." The new Center for Geographical Analysis at Harvard will go a long way toward rectifying past deficiencies and meeting this new demand at Harvard.

The Center has strong potential to expand and grow. You can imagine the thrill I felt a few months ago, after the

Center's Director Peter Bol wrote to me with the exciting, but then still not public news that "The university has agreed to fund the Center out of its own resources (and that any gifts would be incremental!) and it looks like we are on track to creating the first professorship. There is tremendous enthusiasm among faculty and administration...I thank you for your support and advice. Getting faculty is the crucial step toward reviving geography at Harvard, once we have one person we can start to add more and out of that will come a program and eventually perhaps a department. We are at a moment of sharply growing awareness of why geographic knowledge matters to all that we do...I will be asking your advice in greater detail in the coming months."

It has been a long process of hard work by many to reach this milestone for geography at Harvard, and I'd like to thank Peter Bol in particular for his leadership during this process, and for his breadth of vision for the Center, and for the program and department to follow. And Peter, you can count on the AAG to continue to support your efforts every step of the way as Harvard and geography set out on this new journey together. Thanks for starting the AAG's centennial years with such gratifying news.

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