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Harvard's President Summers Launches New Geography Center

A string quartet greeted attendees at the impressive ceremony marking the formal launch of the Center for Geographical Analysis (CGA) at Harvard on the fifth of May, 2006, while a large banner on the façade of the sleek modern building just off Harvard Square which is home to the new center trumpeted "Harvard Returns to Geography."

"Someone has said when Harvard takes a step it blazes a path," intoned President Lawrence H. Summers as he opened the proceedings. "By embracing the new geography, I think Harvard's taking an important step today."

"This is an opportunity to explore vast, not virgin, intellectual territory," he added, "but intellectual territory that can now be approached with new perspectives, new tools, and in newly important ways. The provost and I have been thrilled to lend our support to [this process], and I expect very, very important things will come out of it in the future."

Peter Bol, Director of the new Center for Geographic Analysis and a professor of East Asian languages and civilizations, also underscored the importance of geography to Harvard's future, saying that, "I am an historian, and am more inclined to look at one place over time—China in my case—but Larry Summers has pushed all of us to think about the university in more global terms. Geography today provides us with the tools for thinking about many places at once, it helps us to see things globally. Geography today, and this new center, has a role to play at a university which aims to understand our world globally, to see how developments in separate places impinge on each other, to model the consequences of human activity and natural events, to measure them and assess their impact, and to make

this knowledge accessible—and comprehensible—to scientist and humanist alike."

Peter also pointed out that "We are bringing geography back into the undergraduate and graduate curriculum" and that "part of our most essential work is to help reconnect the social and environmental sciences."

He added that, "To return to geography is to recognize that the discipline, and technologies, of geographic inquiry—of spatial analysis—have become an essential approach to understanding the interactions in human society and in the natural environment and between society and the

environment. This is a matter of concern for social scientists and for environmental scientists, for urban planners and for landscape designers, for historians and for humanists."

As I write, Harvard is nearing the final stages of appointing a key new tenured full professor, who will also replace Peter Bol as Director of the CGA. The center also hopes to make at least four other faculty appointments over the next few years to facilitate research within and across many disciplines and within and across the schools at Harvard. And for that, Bol noted, "we need faculty with an understanding of the history and possibilities for future development of the new geography and its technologies."

Referencing Harvard's misguided decision to eliminate geography from its curricula in 1948, President Summers emphasized, "That is the past. Geography is a very different field today, and it is increasingly at the center of a very wide range of intellectual concerns."



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Jack Dangermond added in his concluding remarks that the Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis "will make a difference in advancing the science of many fields. What happens with this center and what starts today will set off shockwaves in the academic world."

Peter Bol wrote to me a few days after the launch ceremony that, "The event per-

suaded me that we have taken a vital first step. My colleague Gary King has concluded that within a few years we will have a Department of Geography again. Thank you for your advice and support, in the past and in the future."

On behalf of the AAG, I'd like to congratulate Peter Bol, President Summers, and all of those who have contributed to

the successful launch of this new center, an historic event for geography, and perhaps for Harvard too. ■

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