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Geography Education and Employment Outside of Academia

In economically turbulent times, many students and college graduates will likely be wondering what options they have at their disposal. Is it time to jump into the job market, or is graduate school a better option? Indeed, many geography departments are hearing from students who are curious about advancing their career options and the value of a degree in geography for future employment. Fortunately, even in difficult times, geography and GIScience students still enjoy growing opportunities to pursue work in business, government, and non-profit organizations where spatial, environmental and interdisciplinary skills are needed. Having strong academic preparation in geography and GIScience will only expand the career opportunities available to students, allowing graduates to enter the job market at a higher level, and to advance more rapidly through the ranks after being hired.

Within the past few years a number of studies in the U.S. and the U.K. have addressed the issue of "employability," a term describing the readiness of an individual to obtain and then maintain employment (Mistry, White, and Berardi 2006; Donert 2007; Solem, Cheung, and Schlemper 2008*). All of these studies point to some important findings. First, hundreds of employer organizations across a broad swath of the Business, Government, and Nonprofit (BGN) sectors seek individuals who are able to think spatially and use geographic methods or technologies to collect, integrate and analyze data on social and natural systems. And the good news for job seekers is that these same employers forecast an increasing demand for these abilities in the coming years.



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A second important finding is that employers view geography education as an essential component of professional development. This is because geography offers the conceptual frameworks, spatial science foundations, interdisciplinary perspectives, and spatial thinking skills that employers seek across BGN sectors. In the experience of the employers surveyed and interviewed in this research, geographic learning through field studies, internships, and academic coursework helps ensure that future BGN professionals acquire these core competencies.

Employers are also reporting broad and growing professional opportunities for geography graduates in areas as diverse as environmental management, transportation, public health, and international trade. Here, too, there are opportunities for geographers to enhance their employability by taking advantage of new models of graduate education such as professional master's degree programs, which integrate management training and internships with GIScience education. Among the many such programs are the new Professional Master's Program in Geography at Temple University, and similar Masters Degree and certificate programs in Geographic Information Science offered by universities ranging from Arizona State University to Penn State University, and dozens of others. The *AAG Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas* provides detailed overview of these educational opportunities (available at www.aag.org).

Many employers still report difficulties finding qualified graduates possessing strong preparation in geography and spatial analysis. In recent years, the AAG has undertaken research projects aimed at

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improving geography education for careers in BGN organizations (as well as in K-12 and higher education). One of the larger challenges identified in this work is the need to better align curricula with students' career aspirations and the needs of employer organizations. This is especially true in doctoral programs where PhD students who once aspired primarily to careers in the academy are now often attracted to equally rewarding and socially engaged careers in government, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Departments in which the M.A./M.S. is the highest degree offered demonstrate clearer understanding of student goals and curricula that address BGN employment opportunities, but these programs still face challenges of implementation and helping students make transitions from traditional academic preparation.

The greater attention now given to BGN career preparation in geography graduate programs also holds promise for recruiting and retaining more women and minority students to the field. This is because many of the students surveyed, including women and minority students, are especially interested in BGN careers, yet often feel that many purely technical graduate programs do not adequately provide them with the career advising and broader educational foundation they see as important to success in these fields. But throughout the educa-

tional and career pipeline, students, parents, and teachers all need more information about the wide variety of career options available, and the preparation required for success in these careers.

Given that context, the AAG has identified broad areas of critical data needs and actions for future work so that future graduates have a clearer sense of the opportunities available to them:

1. Better data on the geographic and general skills that graduates employed in BGN positions use in their daily work;
2. Local, regional, and national estimates of employers' demand for geographic and geospatial skills in different types of BGN organizations;
3. Comparisons and assessments of the undergraduate and graduate curricula in geography for preparation in BGN careers;
4. Continued development of disciplinary infrastructure to enhance graduate advising, career preparation, and transition support for early career geography and GIS professionals in BGN organizations, modeled after the success of recent National Science Foundation funded programs such as the Geography Faculty Development Alliance and the AAG's Enhancing Departments

and Graduate Education in Geography (EDGE) program.

Geography graduate and undergraduate programs have undertaken a leading role nationally in providing the broad-based geography educational and research programs needed by students and employers across BGN sectors. Thanks to the hard work and goodwill of countless individuals in the geography and GIScience communities, we are collectively developing the capacity for meeting the educational and employment needs of our next generation of students. The AAG Annual Meeting in Las Vegas will feature many sessions and workshops for geographers seeking careers in BGN organizations. Interviews with both academic and BGN employers will also be available at the AAG Jobs in Geography Center during the Las Vegas meeting. For more information on educational programs available in geography, GIS, and GIScience, visit www.aag.org/education. ■

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*References: See *From the Meridian* columns on the AAG website for full citations.