

## Discovering Geography

One of the most significant sequences in my life began with a suggestion from a fellow student at Valparaiso University during my freshman year that I take a set of geomorphology courses to fulfill a general science requirement. "Geowhat?" was my initial response to her, but after examining the textbooks, I followed through. So there I was, sitting in a geomorphology lecture in the early autumn of 1969, basking in my new insights about the processes that formed the landscapes that long had fascinated me. "Now if we just add the people," I thought to myself, "we'll have a subject that I know I'll want to major in. And best of all, someone will probably pay me to learn and use geography for the rest of my life!"

Looking back on activities and things that interested me as a youth, I believe I was born a geographer. Despite some contact with the subject when I was growing up, however, I didn't encounter geography as a discipline until my college years. Fortunately, I attended a university with a strong geography program, and a chance encounter let me discover that it taught courses on subjects that fascinated me.

I wonder how many other people who might naturally find geography attractive fail to discover the exciting and valuable perspective that it can provide. Who are these people? What can be done to increase the likelihood that they will discover geography — and discover themselves as geographers?

Educational programs are natural places to seek such an opportunity, as nearly every young person in our nation has many years of classroom or home-school experience. When and how are students exposed to geography? Is that exposure enjoyable? Are they exposed to the concepts, ideas, and techniques that enable them to frame geographic questions and explore the viability of answers to those questions, or are students exposed to geography as a set of "facts" whose memorization somehow constitutes knowledge? Does geography broaden the set of learning skills that

people can use throughout their lives, or is it something that can be forgotten until some kind of event makes them realize that they might be able to find some useful information on a map. When confronted with geographic topics and ways to use geographic approaches, many people find geography to be an interesting and valuable perspective.

Drawing on insights like those provided in the National Research Council's recent study, *Learning to Think Spatially: GIS as a Support System in the K-12 Curriculum*, we need to be more attentive to helping educators develop curricular materials and approaches that provide age-appropriate spatial thinking skills for students. And to complement these materials, we need to help broaden the knowledge and thinking skills of teachers. The new co-location of the National Council for Geographic Education with the AAG should offer new opportunities to make K-12 geography education programs even more interesting and beneficial for students across all grade levels.

The rapid growth in participation in Advanced Placement (AP) Human Geography classes has been an excellent medium for exposing highly capable high school students to geography as we would like to have it taught. This course is contributing to a previously unknown phenomenon — students who want to major in geography as incoming freshman.

But we can't wait until the high school years to try to attract future geographers. In many discussions over the years regarding how to attract people from traditionally underrepresented groups into scientific careers, minority-group scientists have spoken of finding the field that became their career at lower grade levels, often during their upper elementary or middle school years. Those are the years when the use of new technologies like GIS and GPS can be especially effective in helping students discover

the value of spatial thinking and the contribution of geographic concepts and approaches.

Another topic that frequently came up in discussions regarding diversity in the scientific workforce is the issue of employability. Colleagues at universities where a large share of the student body consists of students who are the first generation in their families to attend college tell me that these students frequently are concerned about pursuing careers that will provide dependable, high-paying jobs. Geography has not traditionally been a field associated with prestigious jobs, but as we well know, it is an excellent discipline from which students can pursue a broad range of rewarding careers.

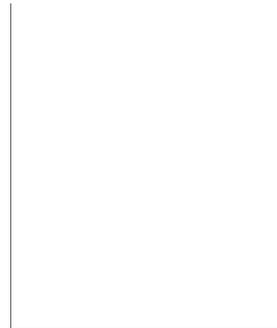
In an effort to merge the natural affinity that many people feel for geography with its potential for making a person more employable,

Patricia Solís of the AAG Central Office developed a poster a few years ago that tried to emphasize why people are attracted to geography. The text of that poster read as follows:

**Your Mom said** you should major in something that will get you a **good job**. You really do want a good job after you graduate. But don't you want to do something you **love**? What if you could do both? What if you could enjoy your work, get paid for it, and have a real impact on the world? After all, we all want to **make a difference**. You really do know where you want to go. **Geography** can take you there.

I am sure that argument resonates with all of us. Our challenge is to help others discover it for themselves.

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