

Geography and Interdisciplinarity – An Opportunity?

At the Race/Ethnicity and Place Conference in DC this September, Orlando Taylor, Dean and Vice-Provost at Howard University, suggested that we should be less concerned with our disciplinary label “geography” and more concerned about what geographical work brings to important thematic questions. He suggested that Howard (and by implication other institutions) might be more invested in building thematic programs such as a center for the study of Race/Ethnicity and Place rather than a department labeled “geography.” This provocative (and at the time rather disconcerting) statement was made as Professor Taylor engaged constructively with us about the role that geographical research and teaching could play at an institution like Howard. His comments have stayed with me this fall as I have traveled around the country talking to geographers working across the full range of professions and programs.

Professor Taylor's comments raise two issues that I discuss in this column. First he signals the widespread interest across the academy—from the natural and social sciences to the humanities—in concepts of space, place, and scale and in the spatiality of processes. We must ensure that geographical work, not just geographical concepts, are well represented in this resurgence of interest. Second, his comments draw attention to the growing importance of interdisciplinary centers that include geographical research and geographers in their ranks. These twin trends represent both opportunities and challenges for geography.

Jan Monk summarized these challenges in one of her columns, saying, “it seems unlikely that the movement towards interdisciplinary and hybrid units will diminish in the near future. While remaining vigilant about supporting geography as a distinctive field, we also need to pursue efforts that will permit geographers to survive in new territories and to learn how to build and sustain interdisciplinary ties.”

(December 2001 *AAG Newsletter*). She encourages us not to be defensive, but rather to pursue dual strategies of strengthening the core of geographical research in departments, while also embracing this trend. As we all know, geographers are working in a dizzying array of programs: population institutes, international and/or globalization studies, environmental studies, women studies, public health programs, development studies, ethnic studies, planning programs, law and society studies, earth sciences, and many more. The growth of interdisciplinary programs is a trend that will continue and we have to think strategically and constructively about the health of both geography departments and geographical research in this context.

At our fall AAG Council Meeting in Sioux Falls we discussed news from each of our regional divisions and learned that South Dakota State University is collaborating with the USGS EROS Data Center on a new Center for Excellence. This investment will bring new hires in geography and a new PhD program in Geospatial Science and Engineering to the region. In a similar vein, we learned that University of Toledo in Ohio is building a brand new interdisciplinary PhD in Spatial Social Sciences, with a lead role for geographers and a series of new faculty hires. The hiring plan for this initiative can be found at <http://spatial.socsci.utoledo.edu>. This proposed PhD program accompanies the department's Geographic Information Science and Applied Geographics Center, which is one of six centers of excellence designated for resource enhancement on the Toledo campus.

This widespread interest in geographical research is good news for the discipline. Interdisciplinary programs allow us to gain access to institutions that don't

have geography departments and in the process, we can potentially expand the presence of geography in those places. This is not pure idealism. I already mentioned the discussions between the AAG and Howard University above. In addition, several Ivy League universities have recently been in contact with the AAG as they are taking a second look at geographic research and curriculum.



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Geographers are also joining interdisciplinary research and teaching teams to address complex societal questions for which a spatial approach is crucial but not sufficient. For example, the National Science Foundation is investing in three national centers investigating human decision-making under climatic uncertainty. (See page

1, this issue.) Taking advantage of these sorts of initiatives can position geography very strongly. For example, Pat Gober at Arizona State University is co-director of the new NSF-funded Decision Center for a Desert City. This high-profile center includes Arizona State's President as one member of an interdisciplinary research team and brings in \$6.9 million to the university to investigate the complex relationships between a rapidly growing urban population, finite water resources, and climatic uncertainty.

Collaborating with interdisciplinary programs can provide other tangible resources to geography departments. At the University of Washington, we are experiencing tight budgets and very limited resources for faculty hiring and graduate student support. We worked with the international studies program on campus to create a joint position in order to hire a new colleague. This same program provides teaching and funding opportunities for our graduate students and this helps to offset belt-tightening in geography. I am not suggesting that we

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