

CROSS CAMPUS COOPERATION FOR GEOGRAPHY:

A Summary of Questionnaire Results

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Introduction

A task force in British Columbia has recently called for the establishment of teacher development networks in the social studies along thematic or disciplinary lines. It especially urges collaboration between school teachers and their counterparts in the academic community. These collaborative networks are needed, the task force argues, to address a "state of crisis" caused in part by inadequate teacher training and limited opportunity for professional development and affiliation.

At this year's meeting at Brock University, we presented a paper entitled "Networking and the Future of Geography," its subject being the interaction among geography and education faculty members. The seeds of the paper are to be found in a report published in *The Operational Geographer* (October 1991) by Richard Baine who was then chair of the CAG Education Committee. In it he noted a serious situation facing geography in those provinces west of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border and that only in one-tenth of the teacher education institutions that responded to his survey was geography considered an important subject.

Writing one year later, Paul Thomas noted that between 1975 and 1990 the number of geographers tenured in faculties of education had declined from 24 to 4. These observations are consistent with ones presented at 1995 annual meeting in Montréal (Semple and Boxall 1992) where the sustainability of geography as a school subject was questioned. The position of geography has continued to decline at provincial level, concurrent with rationalization in high education, and driven by concerns about the effectiveness of provincial education systems and the ability to fund them.

Survey

A questionnaire was circulated among geography and education faculty members in the spring of this year. Its purpose was to determine the present extent of formal and informal interaction among the two groups and to assess the possibilities for further linkage in the interest of promoting geography.

We attempted to contact by email all geographers teaching at post-secondary institutions in Canada. The email described the purpose of the survey and provided a link to the questionnaire. In total, 670 emails were sent, including 47 to Chairs of Departments of Geography. Ninety-three responses were received, representing a response rate of just under 14%. Seventeen (36%) of the Chairs responded. All regions of the country were represented in the pool of completed questionnaires, as was a wide range of teaching experience. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the number of responses from Quebec

geographers was low (8 in total, 3 from chairs). A French version of the questionnaire was not available and geographers teaching at CEGEPs were not contacted.

Results

Questionnaire results indicate that the linkages between academic geographers and educators are, as Thomas (1995/1996) suggests, not well developed. At the same time, there also appears to be a desire for stronger linkages and a sense that improved geographic education in schools is necessary for a healthy and competitive discipline.

Of the 17 departments of geography that responded, 12 are part of post-secondary institutions that also offer programs in education. Only 2 of these departments have established, or plan to establish, direct connections with education programs through cross-appointed faculty, targeted course offerings, workshops, or joint committees. Informal connections or interest in geographic education appear are much stronger. Forty percent of the departments had at least one faculty member who had conducted research on geographic education in the past 5 years. Almost all indicated, furthermore, that they had participated in activities promoting geographic education. The most frequently mentioned activities were open house events (67%), classroom visits (59%), and teacher workshops (43%) (Table 1). Less than 20% of the respondents indicated that they have participated in activities associated with education programs or organisations such as the Canadian Council for Geographic Education (CCGE). However, when asked to identify the activity that can contribute most to geographic education, teacher workshops received the greatest response.

We anticipated that the collective demands and rewards of working in publish-or-perish environments would be the factor that most discouraged greater participation in geographic education activities. Education initiatives, including excellence in teaching, are generally thought to be less important than research in tenure and promotion decisions. Our survey indicated, however, while research commitments and promotion criteria were a key factor, that it was not the most important (Table 2). The greatest barrier to stronger linkages appears to be the lack of existing disciplinary connections between schools and post-secondary institutions. These missing connections include both formal networks and a common intellectual basis. Several offered written comments about the low status of geography in school systems and of the complexity and difficulty of changing school curriculum. School geography was described as "out of touch" and "out of date", of doing a poor job of selling itself as "something with a future". Others criticised academic geographers lack of understanding that school geography "is in crisis" and that the "future of post-secondary geography depends on active cooperation with the secondary schools". Not surprisingly, stronger networks, coordinated school and post-secondary programs, and better teacher training in geography were felt to be among the best ways to build stronger linkages between education and geography.

Co-op programs and better promotion of the discipline were also mentioned in written responses.

Support for national standards for geographic education was strong. Seventy-three percent of all respondents, and 91% of those who answered yes or no, thought that the development of standards should be a priority. This question also generated considerable, and often passionate, written responses. Supporters presented several arguments for national standards. The most common position is that standards would improve the number and competence of students entering geography programs at post-secondary institutions. There is a strong sense that students entering university do not understand what academic geography is and what career paths it offers. Others similarly felt that standards would help non-geographers teach school geography and that standards would provide direction for (and perhaps encourage) school systems that are updating their curriculum. Several geographers argued more philosophically that a grounding in geography is essential for understanding Canada and its place in the world. One respondent commented, for example, that "National geography standards are part of the culture of a country and are as important as history or math standards"; while another suggested that "Citizens should be familiar with the geography of their own country and national standards are the best way to ensure a common culture of understanding of the nation's geography." The role that national standards could play in increasing the public profile and status of the discipline was also frequently mentioned.

Support for the development of national standards varied little by region. However, ten respondents argued that implementation of the standards would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, because education is a provincial responsibility. There is just too much variation in educational standards, curriculum content, and even political agendas, they suggested, for national standards to work.

The questionnaire also asked respondents how familiar they are with the CCGE's and the US based National Council for Geographic Education's educational and promotional activities. Geography Awareness Week was the best known at 57% with the Geography Challenge, 42% and Summer Institutes, 29%, ranking second and third among the CCGE's activities (Table 3). Other activities (essay contest, web pages, workshops) were mentioned by less than 20% of respondents. These results indicate, we feel, that the CCGE and the CAG Education Committee need to consider ways for improving awareness of their activities and of educational issues in general amongst academic geographers. Certainly good communication is essential in for the development of national standards.

Conclusion

The findings lend support to two initiatives that may well capitalize on the growing liaison between the CAG Education Committee and the education committee of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society known as the Canadian Council for Geographic Education. The first of these concerns

teacher training.

With a continued decline in the capacity of education faculties to offer geography as a teachable subject in B. Ed. programs, we might well be facing the need to train geography teachers through in-service summer programs after they have graduated from B. Ed. programs and begun teaching. For some years the CCGE has been offering summer institutes modelled after those developed in the United States by the National Geographic Society. Perhaps some of these could be made more formal with degree credit being given; if so, it will be as the result of cross-campus cooperation between geography and education faculty.

The second initiative concerns the development of national standards for Canada. While these can developed from existing ones which are generic (rather than country-specific) it is imperative that there be academic involvement. The criticism of school geography voiced by some of the respondents to our questionnaire was fair criticism; but the low status of many school geography courses reflects the limited academic input which they receive, the type of input which alone can keep teachers in touch with the frontiers of the discipline. The publishing of national standards will not of itself effect an improvement in the position of geography. Concurrent developments in teacher education and the production of academically sound resource materials will be crucial. The case for improved networking and collaboration between school and university faculty is apparent. Respondents to our questionnaire indicated that while research commitments and promotion criteria were key factors in the barrier to stronger linkages between school and university, they were not the most important. This in itself should encourage further exploration of such linkages.

References

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- Thomas, P. (1992), "Some Critical Factors in the Institutional Context of Canadian School Geography", in *International Perspectives in Geographic Education*, A. David Hill (ed), Centre for Geographic Education, Dept. of Geography, University of Colorado at Boulder, pp. 119-129.
- Thomas, P. (1995/1996), "A Case Study for National Standards in Canadian School-Geography", *Western Geographer*, 5/6: 74-98.

(See following page for tables)

TABLE 1

Activity	% Participated In	% Most Important
Sessions on Geog. Ed	36.6	8.6
Classroom Visits	59.1	16.1
Field Trips	34.4	8.6
Open Houses	66.7	11.8
Geography Workshops	43.0	1.1
Education Liaisons	19.4	2.2
CCGE	16.1	36.6
Other	19.4	6.5

TABLE 2

Which of the following factors do you believe may discourage the building of stronger links between Geography and Education?	%
No Faculty of Education	15.1
Research and publication commitments	33.3
Overall work-load	65.6
Tenure and promotion criteria	40.9
Lack of interest	35.5
Differences in school and university geography	46.2
No or few geography courses in schools	46.2
Limited contact between schools and post-secondary institutions	68.8
Many social studies teachers have limited or no training in geography	57.0
Coordination, scheduling difficulties	59.1
Other	16.1

TABLE 3

CCGE/NCGE Initiatives	% Familiar With
CCGE Geography Challenge	41.9
CCGE Essay Contest	18.3
CCGE Web Pages	19.4
CCGE Summer Institutes	29.0
CCGE Workshops	16.1
CCGE Geog. Awareness Week	57.1
CCGE Family Challenge	8.6
US Standards	28.0
State Alliances	15.4
NCGE Conference	20.4
<i>Journal Of Geography</i>	47.3