

On The Question Of A Core In Geography

Chris Sharpe

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Part I

Last fall the Chair of a large Canadian Geography department asked me if the CAG has an ‘official’ definition of geography. I replied that it did not. But the question kept nagging at me as my Department struggled to deal with the all-too-familiar challenges created by the ‘fickle hand of demographic accident’ (Wynn, 2004: 3)¹. In the 1980s the Department of Geography at Memorial University boasted a complement of 24 faculty members. By the end of this academic year we will have a faculty complement of only 9.5. Although we will be joined in the fall by two newly-appointed colleagues, this will still leave us less than half the size we were twenty years ago, bereft of climatologists and historical geographers, and two years away from the disappearance of economic geography. This dramatic decline in faculty complement has brought us face to face with the basic question of how to define the irreducible core of a credible geography programme. The hard choices we had to make left us a programme in which seven of the fifteen courses required for a major are specified, and the number of optional course offerings sharply reduced. In the long run I believe we will be the stronger for it, and our students better prepared for life, although this is by no means certain.

There has been no debate on the nature of geography or questions related to curriculum design within the CAG for a long time. Some readers of this column will think this entirely appropriate. But given the unprecedented challenges faced by ‘academic’ geography at the moment, it is a debate we probably must have. I suggest this knowing that a University reward system which consistently and universally downgrades the importance of teaching, the popularity and availability of teaching buy-outs, and the increasing dependence on sessional lecturers all militate against a widespread engagement with this subject.

In 1989 M.E. Elliot Hurst said ‘geography has neither existence nor future’. If do not pay collective attention to the fundamental question of what the core of concepts and methods of geography are, and how they can best be taught to our students, his bleak assessment might turn out to be true. I am not arguing that we should pander to an outdated public conception of what the discipline is ‘about’. But neither can we afford to succumb to the pressures, both internal and external, that demand we continually reshape our collective identity in a risky attempt to curry favour with politicians and funding agencies.

Nearly twenty years ago David Stoddart argued that Geography must return to its abandoned intellectual core, ‘that structuring of the world in a comparative and analytic frame which characterized the philosophers and scholars of the Enlightenment ... who asked the big questions about man, land, resources and human potential’, if it was to survive (1987). His premise was that geography is a holistic discipline in which neither physical nor human geography can have a viable independent existence. If asked, many of us would probably define geography as an integrative discipline that brings together a knowledge of and appreciation for the two different but inseparable aspects of the world. But most of us don’t really practice that kind of geography in our normal teaching and research duties. There is an uncomfortable truth in Stoddart’s assertion that ‘Geographers have forgotten - it is extraordinary to have to say so - that some parts of the Earth are high, other low; some wet, others dry’ some desert, others covered by forest and grassland and ice. No one every seems to mention these days that two-thirds of the surface of the planet is covered by the sea’. And if we don’t think these things are important our students will learn to ignore them too.

I am not arguing that we should all try to recreate some mythical golden age when all

geographers were polymaths, or that we should abandon our specialisms for a generalized existence based on some kind of regional approach. But whatever else we do, we must instill in our students a passion for the core of geography. >Location, position, distance, area; these are our basic building blocks. Everything depends on what you do with them, but you cannot do very much if you do not know what they are, and what they mean” (Stoddart, 1989: 331).

Former British Prime Minister James Callaghan said that >the aims of education are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively constructive place in society and also to fit them for a job or work. Not one or the other, but both” (quoted in Walford, 2001: 314). Unfortunately the instrumentalist view of education currently held by many governments sees it almost exclusively as a means of helping young people get a job. And, because we are becoming a discipline which we speaks increasingly impenetrable languages, and engages too often in the “chauvinist self-indulgence of our contemporary obsession with the minutiae of our own affluent and urbanized society” (Stoddart, 1989: 334) we do not rank very high in any list of ‘practical’ disciplines. We exacerbate the situation by too easily denigrating the intellectual validity of the things that concern our colleagues. The lack of mutual between the practitioners of multiple and contested geographies may be the greatest barrier to disciplinary promotion (Thrift, 2002).

Cutting edge research advances the theoretical underpinnings of geographic enquiry, and sub-disciplinary specialization is obviously necessary at the individual level. But a genuine commitment to a more broadly-based discipline is necessary to support it. Fragmentation has reduced the number of academics who consider themselves geographers (Stannard, 2003: 318). The continuing proliferation of paradigmatic research styles and competing interpretive lenses has led to a compartmentalization of knowledge and a weakening of our ability to understand broad processes (Bourne, 1996: 5).

I conclude by returning to the question that was asked of me last fall: is there a common core in Canadian Geography, and is it taught in our programmes? Should there be? I fear that if we continue to stress the flexibility and adaptability of geography, and base our future on an ability to offer little more than pragmatic skill sets, we risk sending a message that the discipline has no real heart, with nothing in it worth learning (Walford, 2001: 315). Diversity is a strength only if it develops around a common core of knowledge (Matthews and Herbert, 2004: x). Geography will not flourish if it is simply defined as a bundle of peacefully co-existing interests, sheltering beneath a disciplinary flag of convenience (Wynn, 2004: 8). If we fail to find common ground on which to base a united front, the whole will continue to be than the sum of its parts (Clifford, 2002). A coherent geography cannot be based on an academic fashion parade in which individuals simply strut the stuff they like while ignoring the empirical, practical and structural determinants of the world. To be successful, geography must emerge from a strong culture which stresses anti-parochialism and the interdependence of people and places (Bonnett, 2003: 61). If it does not, we risk confirming Stoddart’s pessimistic view that >people find no use for a geography which tells them nothing about the world in which they live ... Such a ... geography simply reinforces public ignorance of the world in which we live. ... It is a path we cannot afford to take.

Part II

A discipline that has no goals, no purpose and no order is, by definition, not a discipline. Rather, it is replaced by the undirected wanderings of individual minds.

Golledge, 1982: 14

If there was a common core in Canadian university geography curricula it could not be based on methodology or philosophy because we could never achieve unanimity in our assumptions about the nature of reality and the ways in which it should be addressed (Palm, 1986). So, it would have to comprise a set of concepts. There are several possible models. The National Geographic Society and the National Council for Geographic Education (1994, 2000) proposed five basic geographic themes: location, place, human environmental interaction, movement and region. The Royal Canadian Geographical Society and the Canadian Council for Geographic Education (2001) suggest six essential elements as the basis of curriculum: the world in spatial terms, places and regions, physical systems, human systems, environment and society and the uses of geography. During one of the very successful sessions on the theme of 'Projecting Geography In The Public Domain' at the recent CAG Annual General Meeting in London, it was suggested that three basic themes might suffice: landscape, region and place. This last, deceptively simple, framework would certainly be comprehensible to those (both colleagues in other disciplines and society at large) who expect us to know about places, regions and peoples. Regardless of how naive we might think this is, we should remember Abler's warning that "we lose face and sow confusion when we disappoint those expectations" (Abler, 1987)

Pogo could have been talking about us when he said "I have seen the enemy and he is us". The disunity which plagues our discipline is largely self-inflicted since most of the attacks have come from within (Taylor, 1986; Freeman, 1986; Bunge, 1983). But a core based on an agreed set of concepts might allow us to talk *to* rather than *past* one another, bridging the gap between 'scarcely communicating provincialisms' (Ley, 2003).

While writing this column, it occurred to me that I might be wasting time on a non-issue. Perhaps other disciplines don't have a common core either. To find out, I asked some colleagues whether there was an irreducible core of knowledge that everybody with a Bachelor's degree in *their* discipline should have. Here is what they told me.

Microeconomics is the undisputed core of economics. Any introductory textbook, whether it is the 1968 Canadian edition of Samuelson that sits on my shelf, or a current one, will make this clear. Sociology's core can be defined only in the most general terms as the history of theoretical perspectives and analytical methodologies. However, most curricula are now dominated by various 'schools' that are ideological in nature rather than sociological so the core is not always taught. In Psychology, all the specialties find common ground in the history of the ideas out of which emerged the study of the mind and all of its manifestations. There is a core in Earth Science too, although it is more difficult to define now than in the days of 'just geology'. A defensible core consists of: mineralogy/petrology, structural geology and stratigraphy, sedimentology and palaeontology. Everything else is simply a tool. There is even a core in History: historical methods and historiography. While there is considerable disagreement about *how* these things should be taught there is little disagreement with the idea that they *should* be taught.

In these five disciplines there is some agreement about what a common core would contain. I doubt that an outside observer would come to the same conclusion about geography. In a subsequent column I will argue, based on an examination of departmental calendar entries, that we seem to have abandoned the notion of a common core in the curriculum.

So what? Does it matter? If it is true that geography is “a deeply contested intellectual project of great antiquity and extraordinary complexity” and never has been, or will be, a single, unified discipline (Heffernan, 2003) would this preclude the existence of a basic core? I think not. On the contrary it may *require* one. Diversity in a discipline is a strength only if it is grounded in an identifiable core (Cooke and Gardiner, 2004). The lack of a defined and defensible core in Canadian university curricula has potentially disastrous consequences. One is the inability to influence the development of curriculum in the schools. Schools are always vulnerable to pressure from ‘the public’ and government to teach what is considered important at the time. Politicians now seem married to the idea that Canadian school performance and educational attainment should be measured primarily in terms of the scientific knowledge and geography continues to be ignored or downgraded as a result (Warkentin and Simpson-Housley, 2001). Too many university administrators, politicians, civil servants and private sector leaders simply do not consider geography to be an indispensable component of a basic education. The North American tendency to ignore geography as been reinforced by the closure of the departments in major private American universities including Chicago, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Northwestern and Yale (Johnston, 2003). This sent a powerful signal that geography was not valued by the administrators of some of the institutions that traditionally turned out the cultural and political elite of America (Koelsch, 2002). Perhaps the restructuring of departments at the Universities of Alberta and Windsor, and McMaster has sent the same signal?

It is easy for those who design school curriculum to brush aside the argument that ‘geography matters’. Most people would admit that they don’t know much about modern physics or chemistry, never liked or understood mathematics, found history complicated and accepted english as a necessary evil. But everybody thinks they know what geography is: it’s about memorizing lists of commodities and learning where to put place names on a map (Mansfield, 2005; Jeans, 2005). It is so simple that it can easily be taught by non-specialists as part of an amalgamated ‘social studies’ curriculum. This commonly-held attitude may explain why geography came dead last among eleven subjects when Canadian elementary and high school students were asked ‘what is your favourite subject’ (Statistics Canada, 2004), and why geography is so consistently relegated to the sidelines of high school curricula (Mansfield, 2005). In the next column I will give you an example of how this has happened in Newfoundland.

Part III Geography in the Schools

“Geographical studies encourage the deepening of a student’s grasp of the world’s complexity and the broadening of their vision.”

David Pierpont Gardner
Former President of the University of California and
Chairman of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1981)

In July, the Athenaeum Hotel and Institution in Chautauqua, New York, presented a week-long series of lectures on “Why Geography Matters”. The programme advertisement that was distributed on Caglist began by saying “despite efforts to revive geography as a key subject, geographic illiteracy afflicts Americans and Canadians of all ages. Why should this be so? ▶

This column continues my exploration of some of the possible reasons why this is so. There seems to be a widespread public perception that geography *does* matter, despite the fact that it continues to slide into oblivion in the schools. My argument is that the absence of a common core around which we can rally may be one of the reasons. Because we don't have a rallying point we have sat on our collective hands and watched impassively as our discipline is marginalized in the schools. The issue of geography in the schools was the subject of animated debate during the RCGS/CCGE/CAG sponsored special sessions on Projecting Geography in the Public Domain that were held at the recent annual general meeting². Margaret North argued that public ignorance of geography starts with the failure of school systems to deliver geographical curriculum, noting that geography is virtually absent in the schools west of Manitoba (North, 2005). In his response Andre Roy suggested that perhaps Margaret's statement was phrased the wrong way around, and that it might be more accurate to say that the absence of geography in school curricula is rooted in public ignorance.

The teaching of any subject is dependent on three key interacting elements: teachers, curriculum and resources. Obviously the role of teachers is critically important. We all know of the dedicated few who struggle to keep the flame alive, and of the rare so-called 'academic' geographers who do their best to assist them despite the absence of University rewards for such work. But what turns out to be at least as critical, and here is the surprise for the uninitiated (including me), is the role of curriculum. To understand its central role you have to start at the end of the process, with the graduation requirements that drive the curriculum. Students are only examined on material that is listed in the curriculum. Reasonably they are not generally interested in learning 'extra' stuff, and teachers are unlikely to try and offer it. In fact they may be actively discouraged from attempts to add (and examine) additional material. So the curriculum determines the number and type of courses that may be offered. Inertia then prevents both rapid and major change. Furthermore, as Dick Mansfield points out (Mansfield, 2005: 7) there is no guarantee that just because a course is "on the books" it will be offered, unless it is a graduation requirement. An optional course will only be offered if there is sufficient enrolment. The current Ontario high school programme requires completion of 30 credits. Eighteen of these, including the Grade 9 Canadian geography course, are required. Nine different optional geography courses are approved for Grades 11 and 12, and all of them can be used to fulfill graduation requirements. However students can select their optional courses from a wide array of language, Canadian and World Studies or Social Sciences and Humanities courses so not all of the geography options are actually offered. The survival of optional courses has become even more threatened since the decision to reduce the length of the Ontario high school programme to four years from five, with no reduction in the number of credits required. Cost-conscious school boards and principals put pressure on students to take only the minimum 30 credits, allowing them to cut back on the number of optional courses they offer. This means that option sheets on which students indicate their preferred course selection will list only those a particular school is prepared to offer. Too often the optional courses in geography are the ones that don't see the light of day. My attendance at the lively, informative and well-attended sessions at the meeting in London made me realize just how ignorant I was of how high school programmes are designed and offered. My naive assumption that all approved courses are always and everywhere available has been stripped away, and my level of pessimism increased accordingly.

I want to elaborate my point using the Newfoundland example. Graduation from high school in

Newfoundland requires the completion of 36 credits including two Canadian Studies and two World Studies credits. There are five of the former (history, geography, issues, economics and law), each offered in both English and French, and two World Studies courses (history and geography). Nine credits must be chosen from Level III courses and the World Geography course can be used to satisfy this requirement and many students take it for this reason. In fact the number of students who wrote the Provincial Geography examination last month was second only to the number writing English. However, every silver lining has a cloud.

The Newfoundland high school programme offers two geography courses: Canadian Geography at Level I and World Geography at Level III. Unfortunately, incoming high school students are openly advised by teachers and guidance counsellors to take Level I Geography only if their junior high school average is below 75 percent. The ‘better’ students are advised to take Canadian history. The attitude that geography is a suitable option for weaker students is hardly new. John Wolforth pointed it out twenty years ago (Wolforth, 1986: 18) and noted that the same lament was sounded almost 40 years ago in an article which appeared in the first issue of *The Canadian Geographer* (Hamilton, 1950). Although the Level I course is not a prerequisite for the Level III World course, students will be more likely to take the senior course if they have completed the earlier one. Furthermore, since the Level III Geography course is not currently offered in French, students in the French Immersion programme have no choice other than Histoire Mondiale 3231 if they wish to use a social science optional course to satisfy the graduation requirements. All this is bad enough, but it gets worse.

Newfoundland high schools offer courses at two levels: Academic and General. To ensure the graduation of as many students as possible, General courses are offered in English, Mathematics and Science. The situation in geography is different. World Geography 3202 is a rigorous course that covers much of the syllabus of Memorial’s introductory course. In fact we once toyed with the idea of permitting students who had done exceptionally well in this course to move directly on to second year courses. World Geography 3200 is a watered-down version which supposedly covers about 70 percent of the material in the regular course, but in practice covers only about half. Teachers have told me that when the high school curriculum was revised a few years ago to accommodate the introduction of Grade 12, it was decided that it would not be possible to soften the World History course sufficiently to permit its offering to General stream students because too much reading was required and the material itself was not conducive to simplification. So Geography 3200 was created to provide an alternative for students who might not be able to pass the Level III history course, and would therefore be prevented from graduating.

The high school handbook distributed to all Grade 9 students in the province lists the General courses in Mathematics, English and Science without editorial comment (Newfoundland, 2005). However it describes Geography 3200 as a course “intended only for those students in a general stream. It is not intended for the majority of students, particularly for those who intend on pursuing a post-secondary education”. The Provincial Curriculum Guide is more specific, saying that it is “a course designed to accommodate students who require a world social studies credit but who would find an honours social studies course very challenging”. To my horror I have discovered that this description is repeated on the Atlas of Canada website.

No other general stream course is described in this way. The most obvious question is ‘why’?

Surely the contemporary globalization of most aspects of human activity would require that Geography have greater prominence in the school curriculum, not less. How are our students to understand the Middle East conflict without knowing about borders and the distribution of religions and ethnic groups? How can they hope to understand anything about climate change and global warming if they know nothing about the world's past and present climate regime and controls? Unfortunately this view is obviously not shared by those who designed the high school curriculum in Newfoundland. Getting more 'respect' for our discipline and what it can offer is a long-term challenge that we must all face.

The deliberate steering of students away from geography courses is disastrous. It deprives us of the opportunity to offer our subject to the best students. Almost twenty years ago the President of the AAG lamented that 'brilliant American students never have a chance to consider geography. They are lost to other disciplines by lack of exposure' (Abler, 1987: 519). Brilliant students in Newfoundland (and elsewhere too, no doubt) suffer from the same restriction.

Our students, their parents and the rest of the general public learn from our behaviour what is important in geography. If we cannot agree on a set of commonly-held and potentially unifying concepts, and ensure that they are incorporated into a high school geography curriculum that is offered on an equal footing with other disciplines, we put the future of our discipline at risk. Because of the way school curricula have developed (or because of the way we have *permitted* them to be developed), many students' exposure to geography is partial, intermittent or absent. The Chairman of the 1981 American National Commission on Excellence in Education noted that because of the low status of geography in the schools and the falling proportion of students who took it 'children not only lose instruction in basic place name geography but are also denied the potential for creative approaches to spatial skills, an understanding of the earth, its resources and the broad patterns of cultural distinction across regions' (Gardner, 1986: 2). The best students are often advised to pass us by. Even if they are not advised to give geography a miss, they would be wise to take other courses. The best students position themselves for rapid transition through the first year of University by taking Advanced Placement courses in High School. An AP human geography course is offered, but not one in physical geography. The usual explanation is that the AP courses are American-based, and physical geography is absent from the curriculum of American schools, as it is in Western Canada (Jeans, 2005).

In despair we sometimes ask why more of the best students don't take geography? The answer may lie in the structure of the school curriculum. It is, however, worth recalling Carl Sauer's observation that geographers 'come rather late into our professional care' (Sauer, 1956). So one of the things we have to be able to do is recognize geographical potential in its raw form so that we can then try to transform what may have been no more than a passing fancy at the time the students registered for their courses, into a lifelong dedication. But I fear that too often when students *do* come into our care we offer them an over-specialized academic menu in which physical and human geography coexist primarily for administrative convenience. Their separateness precludes the synthesis which we proclaim to be our distinguishing characteristic. Then we socialize our graduate students in a narrow intellectual world in which harsh and unrelenting criticism of alternative perspectives is commonplace (Gober, 2000).

What we do *not* do well enough is highlight and celebrate the things we hold in common. We don't challenge our students to reconcile the things we *actually* do in our daily lives with what

geographers could or *should* do (Golledge, 1982). We don't encourage them to explore the big, fundamental, important issues in which the unity of geography is obvious (Douglas, 1986; Johnston, 1986).

Part IV
The Absence Of A Core Curriculum

Let us assume that everyone who has a degree in geography should share a common core of knowledge, and that Canadian university geography curricula should offer the courses necessary to pass this core on to our students. Then let us look at what is offered to Geography students in Canada to see if such a core exists. I freely admit the idiosyncratic nature of the tabulation on which my argument rests, but this column is polemic, and it serves my purpose well enough. The websites of 34 Departments were examined to determine the number of courses that are required for the completion of a general degree³. I was not looking for the simple number of courses required to satisfy degree and major requirements. I was looking for the courses which are specifically required (not "take 3 of the following..."). In the sampled group the number varied from 13 to zero.

Can we deduce from the listing of required courses that there is an essential core in Canadian geography, as taught in the universities? I think not. My list included 89 different course titles. The highest frequency of occurrence was Human Geography, which appeared eleven times. Seventy titles appeared only once. Making some arbitrary decisions about content allowed me to reduce the number to 26 generic course types which are outlined in the following table.

Number of Canadian Geography Programmes Requiring Specified Courses	
Physical Geography	17
Human Geography	14
Data analysis/Methodology	9
Quantitative Methods/Statistics	8
Geography and Environment	7
Economic Geography	7
World Geography	6
Climate	6
Cultural Geography	5

GIS	4
Introduction to Geography	3
Map and Air Photo Interpretation	3
Cartography	3
Geomorphology	3
Canada	2
Social Geography	2
Computer mapping	2
GISciences	2
Resources	2
History and/or Philosophy	2
Cartography and Remote Sensing	2
Field Camp	1
Political Geography	1
Biogeography	1
Urban Geography	1

The most commonly offered titles are general physical geography and human geography. ‘World Geography’ courses which include some integration of the two are taught in only 6 departments, This suggests that there isn’t much in the way of really integrated teaching going on out there. This would not surprise Richard Hartshorne who lamented the increasing division of the discipline into physical and human halves nearly a half-century ago and noted (in a remark that would have been more appropriate in my previous column) that “the disastrous consequences for the status of geography in the secondary schools is well known” (Hartshorn, 1959: 79).

Integration between human and physical geography has historically been achieved through shared methodologies, most importantly mapping and fieldwork. Remember Bunge’s characteristically wry remark (1983) that “everybody but geographers knows what geographers do: they explore and they map”. Unfortunately neither maps nor fieldwork appear to be an important part of the way geography is currently practised. In the case of maps this is surprising since maps have traditionally been considered a basic part of our disciplinary framework (Borchert, 1987). Sauer said “show me a geographer who does not need maps constantly, and want them about him, and I shall have my doubts as to whether he has made the right choice in

life” (1956: 289). Hartshorne argued that if a problem cannot be studied using maps, then it may not be a geographical problem (1939: 425). As antediluvian as these views may be, I share them, and am not alone in thinking that in both our teaching and research we have relegated maps to the dustbin, at our peril (see McNally, 1987). In a recent TIBG editorial, Ron Martin (2000) decried the absence of maps in the great majority of the articles in that venerable journal ► only 50 pages of maps in more than 2000 pages of text published between 1995 and 2000. He admits that conventional maps may have difficulty in representing new conceptions of place and space and James Wheeler attributes the decline in the use of maps to the same cause (1998). However, I believe that maps are still an indispensable tool. They not only represent spatial variation (and I acknowledge that the word ‘represent’ is contested), they also provide clues to the social and cultural circumstances which produced them and in the end may help advance the cause of geographical research and understanding by raising more questions than they answer (Lewis, 1985: 471).

The variety of names attached to courses dealing with some aspect of geographical information science makes the counting exercise a bit dodgy. But if you’re willing to accept a bit of imprecision in the counts, note how few departments require the completion of a mapping course: 4 GISystems, 3 map and air photo interpretation, 3 cartography 2 computer mapping and 2 GISciences. The total is less than half: 14 out of 34 departments. This is not to suggest that only that number of departments produce students who appreciate something of the wonder of maps ► but that is all that specifically require the completion of mapping courses. Considering how often we proclaim that ‘geography matters’, or that it ‘makes a difference’, the apparent demise of the map is somewhat curious.

Field work, which to Sauer was the principal means for training the geographer (1956: 296) also seems to have become part of geography’s past (Stoddart and Adams, 2004). Is this because the engagement with social and cultural theory has made the library the proper place for reflection? Is it because undergraduate fieldwork is at the mercy of unimaginative departmental resource allocation models, the constraints of risk assessment and the fear of punitive litigation and has been deemed too expensive and too risky? There is no doubt that field courses and camps in the past were not always either educational or enjoyable, but training in field-based enquiry need not follow old, discredited models (see Wheeler, 2001). Whatever the reasons might be, field work has all but disappeared from the common syllabus. Only two departments currently require completion of a field-based component for the general degree, although my own department will require it for all students entering the programme after this coming September. Such a small engagement with a traditional component of a geographical education is unfortunate. Consider what Peirce Lewis told his audience (1985: 472).

We need, first and foremost, to insist that our students pay attention to the immediate world that lies all about them ► in short to use their eyes and attach them to their brains. ... The world out there is full of *evidence* (original emphasis) of the sort of people we were, and are, and are in the process of becoming. Equally, that tangible, visible world is full of *questions* that geographers should be asking.

Work ‘in the field’ can also help ensure that rooting in ‘ground level reality’ which Larry Brown considers so essential to the practice of geography (1999: 1).

Current curricula also lack requirements for regional courses and courses on the history of the discipline. Two departments require a course on Canada. No others specifically require any regional courses at all. I know that the word 'region' will raise a red flag in many quarters, and deservedly so, if the term denotes the pre-Woodstock type of regional course. But the fact that we may have fallen into bad habits in the past should not be taken as a guarantee that we would follow the same path today. The recent study of the United States edited by Agnew and Smith (2002) is a clear demonstration that there are other approaches to the study of regions. But we seem loath to run the risk of offering such courses, despite the fact that in an era of enrollment-driven budgeting we seem content to eschew the offering of courses that, however we might feel about their methodological or philosophical integrity, are almost always well-subscribed.

At least two Past Presidents of the AAG, Carl Sauer (1956) and Larry Brown (1999) have publicly advocated how essential it is that we know and celebrate our past. Only if we believe in the importance of knowing where we came from, and how we got to where we are, and accept the challenge (and it is a challenge - see Lorimer and Spedding, 2002) of passing on this institutional memory to our students can we hope to ensure the survival of our discipline. Yet only two departments require their general stream students to complete a course dealing with the history and/or methodology and/or philosophy of their discipline.

My argument in this series of columns has been that we seem to have abandoned the belief that a common disciplinary core is not only possible, but necessary. As a result we have left ourselves vulnerable in the struggle to sustain geography as a distinctive field of study and university discipline. My concern is widely shared. More than twenty years ago, Richard Morrill lamented that geography was too often considered a parasitic profession with no core - only a loose collection of specialities which were more logically considered the components of more established disciplines. And he said that this image was reinforced by those institutions where there is a geography of almost everything but no core sequence. He asked "can geography really be what geographers feel like doing?" (1983: 2). Goudie (1986: 458) argued that the continued vitality and, perhaps even the existence of geography would be prejudiced if it continued to splinter into discrete sub-disciplines. Peter Taylor (1986: 448) believed that the survival of geography requires a disciplinary unity that was lacking when he wrote. Scholarly safety, at least in the short term, may be guaranteed by the overspecialization, narrowness and fragmentation that are a result of the widespread adaptation of adjectival geographies, but it comes at a high price. Patricia Gober would agree. In her millennium year Presidential Address to the AAG, she says that in the struggle for respectability from our cognate peers, we have lost our confidence in the ability to generalize (Longley, 2000) and as a result, much of our former power to reach across branches of knowledge to create a common groundwork of explanation (Gober, 2000: 3)

The absence of a widely-shared loyalty to a broadly-based and securely anchored discipline may be one of the factors which underlies the obvious indifference that many of our colleagues feel towards the CAG. By the end of last year, the number of members had surpassed 1,000 for the first time since 1993. This is a remarkable recovery from the nadir of 760 members in 1997, but a far cry from the peak of 1448 in 1991. The shrinking of university faculty complements across the country means that we will almost certainly never approach this number again. But what concerns me is the fact that 59 percent of those holding appointments in Canadian departments of geography, and 13 of the 45 Heads/Chairs, do not belong to the CAG. In my opinion, this is a

deplorable situation. But perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I'm nostalgic for a past golden age of widespread support for the national association that may never have existed. For many Canadian geographers, membership in specialist groups is more important in terms of career advancement.

Yet I find it difficult to accept that so many of my colleagues fail to see the benefits of membership in our national organization. I have always treasured the intangible, yet very real benefits of belonging to an organization of like-minded people. I am not naive enough to ignore the fact that many practitioners don't believe there *are* any like-minded people within the Association. But those who choose not to belong ignore the fact that large, and increasing amounts of our annual budget are being earmarked in one way or another for the support of student research and travel to meetings. More members means more money to direct towards the students. I would like to think that even if colleagues, especially those who work outside of the university world, see no immediate personal benefits from their joining, they will see how it would help support the continued existence of the discipline. Let me conclude by repeating Peirce Lewis' presidential exhortation to the members of the AAG (1985: 472):

How do we go about that crucial job of public education and persuasion? If the job were easy it would have been done already. But there are a few things we can do. The first wounds almost trivial, given the cosmic level of this discussion, but I assure you it is not: professional geographers should support this Association, and urge their colleagues to support it too. The AAG is more than a fraternal club: it is perhaps the most effective tool we have to bring our collective minds and muscle to bear in places where geography matters: in the making of governmental policy, in the planning of education for our children, and in helping to persuade the public through the media that they need more and better geographic education than they have been getting

Notes

¹ Graeme Wynn's two brilliant essays (1999, 2004) on the nature of geography and geographical enquiry should be required reading for every geographer in this country.

² All of the keynote papers, and the responses can be downloaded from the Canadian Council for Geographic Education website at <www.ccege.org>. Click on ►What's New" and then follow the link to the Geography Symposium.

³ I gratefully acknowledge the painstaking work of Sarah Nicholson who created the original tabulation.

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