

Promoting Geography: Reach Out and Teach Someone

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Geography has received considerable press in the last several years, yet virtually all the news has been bad. We are all familiar with the litany of studies and articles bemoaning the lack of geographic knowledge amongst public school and post-secondary students, as well as the general public. We hear of government-mandated efforts to require new global awareness courses (viz. more social studies), geographic alliance programs such as that funded by the National Geographic Society, and a host of other innovative programs designed to rectify 'the problem.' While we applaud these efforts, and are in fact participants in two such programs, we also believe that their potential success or implementation is several years away, and that if we wait for programs such as these to reach us, we will have lost precious time, potential public support, and the opportunity to build a local foundation upon which larger regional or national programs can be constructed.

Similarly, it is our belief that much of the geographic ignorance out there is the fault, not entirely of our school systems, teachers, or parents, but also of academic geographers who have failed to demonstrate the relevancy of spatial and regional studies to our society (see Kevan and Green-Milberg 1989). Geography is not as integral a component of our educational system today because we have neglected our responsibilities to our local educational system and the public at large.

Geography deserves a 'place' in our schools for all the obvious reasons: global awareness, world market systems, environmental and resource management, war/peace studies, to name but a few areas of geographic relevancy. But to claim this rightful place, we postulate that 'geographers' must become more locally visible in advancing geographic curricula themes, promoting awareness, and 'popularizing' the profession via the media. In the following paragraphs we will outline a framework that we believe could prove useful in our efforts to begin revitalizing geography.

While the U.S. system is 'ultra-local' in control and that of Canada more provincially organized, both nevertheless attempt to respond to the needs of their regional citizenry and both approach geography, for the most part, via the social studies curriculum umbrella (e.g., Milburn 1984; Winston 1984; Ontario Department of Education 1988). Additionally, despite Provincial mandates to teach geography, studies indicate that

the delivery of the basic concepts of our discipline is sporadic, provincial (often literally and figuratively), haphazard, and more often than not delivered by non-specialists, (i.e., teachers not holding a geography degree) (see Nova Scotia Department of Education 1981; Alberta Department of Education 1981; Ontario Department of Education 1988). The end result is that both nations, Canada and the United States, appear to be graduating geographically illiterate students (Grosvenor 1989).

Solution

The information presented in Table 1 offers a framework for individual initiative in promoting geography at the public school, undergraduate, and community level. The categories are not meant to be mutually exclusive nor can they represent the full universe of possible approaches. Additionally, we have attempted to delimit a series of activities which would not add significantly to the already heavy workload of our nation's educators. Moreover, this framework is not geared toward what 'should be done' in individual geography courses for that is more appropriate for in-service sessions where a variety of specific models, lessons, activities, and curricula units may be presented to practicing teachers for adoption in their classes. Rather, our program is directed toward a larger audience for which, we feel, more attention must be immediately generated.

Curriculum Advancement

The first strategy, curriculum advancement, involves a process of lobbying decision-makers to advance, promote, and expand geography course offerings at the primary and secondary levels. We now have at our immediate disposal the tool or mechanism for such efforts in the AAG-NCGE curriculum program guides, as well as through the auspices of the Geographic Education National Implementation Project (GENIP).¹ The guides are thoughtful, detailed documents suggesting a complete program, at all grade levels (K-12), for developing the spatial and analytical skills that lie at the heart of geographic inquiry. They apply to Canadian and American school systems equally well. Actively promoting their implementation or adoption is likely to be necessary at several administrative levels, that is, before the provincial or state education agency, a local school committee, or school board. The first obviously requires considerable time and effort and may, therefore, represent more appropriate activities for school curriculum advi-

sors, departmental chairs or administrators. The rewards of such efforts are visible in a number of jurisdictions which have recently reacted to pressures and adopted broad-based geography requirements. In the United States, for example, no fewer than eleven states, mostly in the South and West, now require geography in some form at the high school level (*GENIP News* 1988).² World geography, for example, is required by all high school graduates in South Dakota; San Diego has added geography requirements to its public school curriculum; the University of Colorado mandates world geography for its College of Arts and Science freshmen; and the University of Tennessee has approved a program of higher entrance requirements, one component of which includes specific geography/global awareness requirements at the high school level (Gibson 1985; Solozano 1985).

To determine the strength or base for advancing curriculum via the AAG/NCGE/GENIP strategies in Canada, we polled the chairs of 17 major geography departments across Canada, asking them to respond to their efforts in the areas depicted in Table 1.³ For curriculum advancement not one department was utilizing this model; virtually none of them were aware of its availability. Several were involved in promoting geography at the local or provincial level, but most efforts were sporadic, ad hoc, or channeled through their Faculties of Education or via individual faculty members who were representatives on local school boards or committees. Only in Ontario and British Columbia did there appear to be sustained curricula advancement efforts, and the latter only recently in response to the Province's proposals to effectively downgrade geography's role in its new Education 2000 program.

It also appears that the CAG could play a more active role here in promoting the GENIP model/philosophy. While its recent efforts in enhanced outreach and geographic education are useful, the CAG needs to play a more active national role than its U.S. counterpart, ostensibly because there is no other national organization in Canada to effectively promote geographic education. (In the U.S. the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) is primarily an organization devoted to promoting geographic education; most members are public school teachers.)

It is obvious from such information, the role of geography in schools, and national

test results that greater efforts are required in promoting more viable geographic curricula in both nations.

Academic Promotion

Our second main category, academic promotion, can be operationalized on two levels. First, promoting geographic awareness in public institutions may be undertaken by faculty visiting local high schools and examining or promoting career opportunities with students, guidance counselors, administrators, and/or parents. While most of us philosophize that such activities could be useful, very few of us are actively involved in the schools. Of the Canadian universities polled, fewer than one-third indicated any activity at all here, with only two reporting consistency in reaching out to our public school support base. Perhaps Milburn is right in his assessment when he says "the gap between the departments of geography and schools (in Canada) is a wide one" (Milburn 1984:27). Since most colleges and universities draw significantly from regional school systems, such activities as academic advisement/recruitment, career counseling, or public speaking engagements would go a long way toward consciousness raising.

At the undergraduate level campus-wide advising sessions at the beginning of each semester may entice a host of new majors and minors. Our experience has demonstrated that offering such sessions in conjunction with a review of career opportunities and the presentation of a departmental brochure greatly enhances the image and attractiveness of our discipline. Promoting geographic opportunities in business, government, and planning, as well as in the traditional field of teaching, has allowed us to double the number of majors at our institution in the last three years. This not only en-

hances geography's position on campus, but, more importantly, it allows more geographically literate graduates to enter the workforce and perhaps train a new generation.

In this respect Canadian efforts seem to outpace those of many U.S. departments. Most Canadian departments polled appear to offer more consistent and timely academic advising and are perhaps more diligent in promoting career opportunities for their majors. Pre-eminent here are the efforts at Ryerson, the University of Victoria, and Waterloo where very active applied and co-op programs successfully graduate and place large numbers of geography majors.

We must again, however, draw attention to the differences between Canadian and U.S. institutions. In the former geography is usually better established, more adequately funded, respected, and ultimately more visible to public sector employers. Consequently, the supply of majors remains steady and the need for recruitment is not as evident as it is in the U.S. Not one of our sample of Canadian departmental chairs expressed a pressing need to recruit or to convince the public about the need for geography. As one western chair noted, there is a "good realization of what geographers can do; they get jobs, lots of jobs."

Nevertheless, most Canadian departments also saw themselves primarily as research centers. While research is necessary and laudable, it should not be conducted at the expense of a broad-based educational and training role or the production simply of a more geographically literate population. Lacking the broader base of the community college and four-year college system of the U.S., Canadian institutions must be especially vigilant of their responsibilities toward the notions of a broad-based geographic education and professional promotion.

Also included within this category of academic promotion is a program of

public engagements, both on and off-campus. This low-cost measure could be sponsored by the institution through a public speakers' bureau, by individual faculty, or even through departmental geography clubs, which occasionally have sufficient funds to subsidize speakers. While most universities operate and some faculty participate in speakers' bureaus, the efforts are usually sporadic, at best. With only a few notable exceptions, we detect no real sustained or professionally sponsored/supported efforts here in either Canada or the U.S. Campus-based geography clubs can only be expected to function on the most local level, yet can contribute significantly in public liaisons. The Keene State College Geography Club, for example, successfully tapped U.S. Armed Forces Intelligence personnel for presentations on the social and economic background of revolution in Central and South America. The Department of National Defense in Ottawa encourages similar engagements from its Reserve Centre personnel nationwide.⁴ Moreover, our Club has sponsored a public forum on (radioactive) waste disposal and promoted faculty presentations in their specializations. We could all more actively tap our colleagues at other proximate institutions for presentations or the AAG central offices for their list of available speakers. Perhaps the CAG should consider supporting a speakers' bureau; its Education Committee or those responsible for broadening the membership base to public school and college educators might be charged with such a mission. Such sponsorship would certainly enhance the visibility, credibility, and utility of geographic studies in both nations.

Media Promotion

Media promotion, our final strategy, represents an area with which few of us are familiar. Virtually all communities are served by regional newspapers and

**Table 1
Methods to Promote Geography**

Curriculum Advancement	Academic Promotion		Media Promotion
	Public School	Collegiate	
1. Advocate adoption of AAG-NCGE Curriculum Guide a. assist the GENIP b. promote CAG sponsorship	1. Visit schools a. students b. counselors c. administrators d. parent groups	1. Campus Advising Sessions 2. Develop lectures on career opportunities 3. Brochure	1. Advisor to local media 2. Write editorials, articles, etc. for regional newspaper 3. Guest interview availability
2. Political Involvement a. lobby state/provincial education agencies b. lobby local school boards	2. Offer local Advisement/ Recruiting Nights 3. Advisement a. advise on curriculum b. guest lecturers 4. College student liaison a. Geography Club sponsorship b. ties to film studies or journalism departments	4. Speakers a. sponsored through Speakers' Bureau b. sponsored through department c. sponsored through Geography Club	4. Public Lectures a. historical societies b. conservation agencies c. environmental forums d. public interest groups 5. Popularize the profession

broadcast media, most of whom would welcome the opportunity to draw on the expertise of local faculty, as well as include reports of relevant local research. Unfortunately most academics refrain from presenting and popularizing their research in the media, yet it provides a broad outlet for establishing a wide-reaching network of potential supporters. Donella Meadows of Dartmouth College (NH) apparently recognized this and now produces a successful newspaper column which has addressed such issues as trash disposal, population growth, planning, and resource management issues. We found no evidence of such an approach among our sample of Canadian universities, although at three institutions several faculty were noted for their regular submission of op-ed pieces. For most of us shunning the media is a low-cost luxury we can no longer afford in today's world of shrinking enrollments, budgetary restraint, and declining geographic literacy. In fact, in a review of the decline of American college and university geography programs, Wilbanks and Libbee (1979) suggest that such public discussions of our research will be essential for future survival.

Although the notion of public addresses was examined earlier, they can also be a useful device for community and media promotion of geography. Presentations are always welcome before such groups as historical societies, conservation agencies, and environmental forums, as is our participation on local planning agencies, public interest groups, and the virtually ubiquitous Soil Conservation Services (SCS) in the U.S. In western Canada the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) fulfills a role similar to the SCS, while each Province's Ministry of Agriculture (County Extension programs) provides an avenue of engagements for the physical, economic, biogeographic, and climatic specialists in geography to reach a broader audience. In essence, these activities simply represent efforts to popularize modern geography beyond the image historically offered by the National Geographic Society. We need a David Suzuki, Carl Sagan, or Linus Pauling of geography to carry the message of the critical importance of spatial analysis and regional studies to the general public. Evidence that this message can be widely embraced is available from the United Kingdom where geography's pivotal role in spatial and regional analysis pervades much of society. Most British public school students study from five to seven years of geography. The discipline ranks sixth in college majors, outpacing economics, biology, sociology, psychology, and geology (Fotheringham 1984). In Austria secondary students study geography for two hours per week for eight years.

For a discipline so adept at interpreting images of our culture and landscape we have failed to cultivate a popular public

image of our own profession. J. Douglas Porteous, at the University of Victoria, recently lamented that geographers face three key problems in the public mind. First, the masses are almost totally unaware of what we do. Second, he notes that our teachings are seen as largely irrelevant, and third, that our image is one of a 'dull and boring' subject (Porteous 1985). Unless we actively alter these impressions we will, as Porteous so pessimistically predicts, be mired in the role of simply offering 'more of the same'. This is the challenge we must accept if we are not to be relegated to the periphery of our educational curriculum. Failure to meet this challenge already appears to be affecting Quebec, where geography has changed "its status from being one of the primary building blocks of education to becoming an appendage to almost any other discipline in the social and physical sciences" (Kevan and Green-Milberg 1989:49). In British Columbia the Ministry of Education's vision of the future (Education 2000) is attempting to 'seriously downgrade' the role of geography in the public school curriculum (Slaymaker 1990). In New Hampshire attempts to broaden the social studies curriculum with additional topics will further erode geography's already tenuous position (Hogan 1990).

Conclusion

Recent evidence clearly indicates that most North Americans are unaware of what geographers do and largely see our discipline as irrelevant. It is thus not hard to understand why recent studies have demonstrated very low levels of geographical knowledge and awareness. We have attempted to provide a framework, based upon a tripartite system of curriculum advancements, academic promotion, and media liaison, by which we can revitalize geography's popular image and reposition the discipline back into the mainstream of our educational systems. These efforts represent a challenge for all geographers to ensure not only our very survival but, more importantly, to provide the public the requisite geographic skills necessary for informed debate in our fast-paced, technological world.

Notes

1. GENIP is a joint venture of the American Geographical Society (AGS), the Association of American Geographers (AAG), the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE), and the National Geographic Society (NGS). Its goal is to improve the status and quality of geographic education. Free membership is available by writing to: GENIP, 1710 Sixteenth Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009-3198.
2. Eleven states requiring geography in some form at the high school level are CA, CO, LA, NY, SD, TX, VT, VA, WA, and WI.
3. Telephone interviews were conducted

in March, 1990. Universities participating: UBC; Victoria, Calgary, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Winnipeg, Brandon, Brock, York, Toronto, Waterloo, Ryerson, Concordia, Laval, Memorial, and St. Mary's. The President of the CAG also participated.

4. U.S. Armed Forces personnel may be scheduled through any local Reserve Center. Canadian Forces personnel are available across the nation and may be scheduled through the Department of National Defense, Public Events Speaking, Speakers' Bureau, Director General Information, Ottawa K1A 0K2(613)996-7955.

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