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AUTHOR Fairweather, Malcolm  
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ABSTRACT

An emphasis on improving the teaching of geography at the undergraduate level can result in an increase in geography majors at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Therefore, the discipline must develop and disseminate new approaches to teaching geography and must supply current information to faculty. Since the first contact many students have with geography is at the introductory level, these courses should be staffed with the most effective teachers, who should emphasize the nature and scope of geography. Departmental awards should include those for teaching as well as for research and departments should develop more precise mechanisms for measuring the caliber of instruction. Further, geography departments must be open to helping students and be active in campus affairs. Geographers who are aware of the needs of students, the job market, and the changing orientation of the discipline should look forward to retraining themselves to keep abreast of the times. Thus, with a renewed emphasis on teaching, geographers can impart the skills and knowledge needed to expand the discipline. (KC)

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THE GEOGRAPHIC PYRAMID: THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING  
IN UNDERGRADUATE GEOGRAPHY PROGRAMS.

Dr. Malcolm Fairweather  
Department of Geography  
State University of New York  
Plattsburgh, New York 12901

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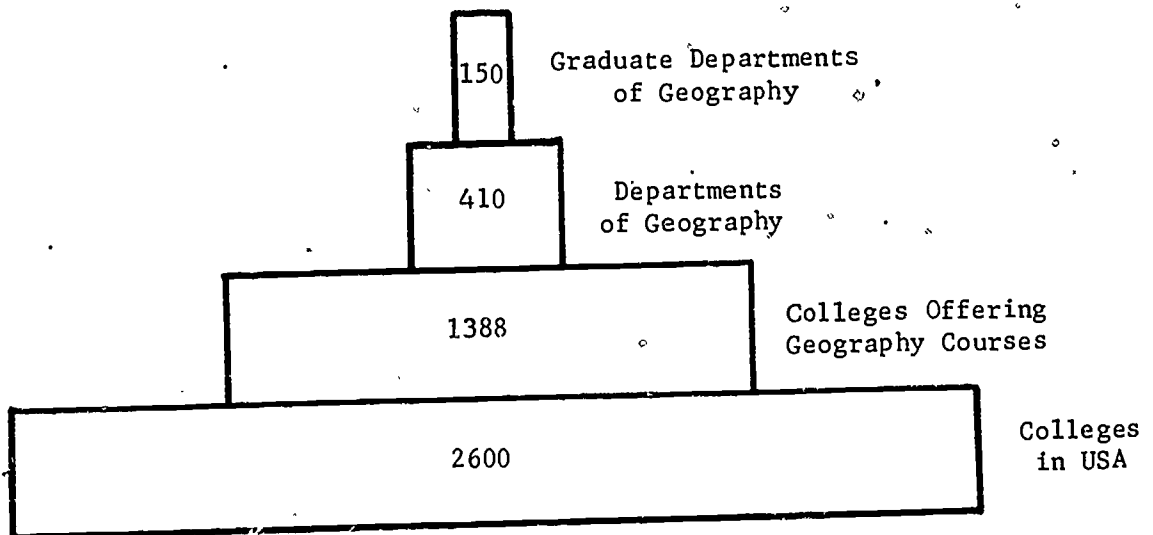
ABSTRACT: The majority of geography programs in the USA offer only undergraduate degrees. They are staffed by faculty whose primary responsibility is to teaching and not research. Furthermore, it is from the ranks of the undergraduate programs that many graduate programs are maintained. It is imperative, therefore, that all members of this discipline make serious attempts to improve the quality of geography's undergraduate education component, to emphasize its importance in the liberal arts and to demonstrate its value as a specialized field of study. Unattractive undergraduate geography courses will not attract students and a decline in the numbers of geography majors will manifest itself negatively at the very base of the profession.

THE GEOGRAPHIC PYRAMID: THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING  
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The development of special interest groups in the Association of American Geographers and the increased interest in skills course offerings as they relate to applied geography brings to mind the fact that our discipline is undergoing change once more. Perhaps now is the time to re-evaluate the entire structure of the field of geography.

Illustration I demonstrates the relative status of the discipline in the academic community. It clearly shows that over half the institutions in the USA do not offer geography courses. Furthermore geography groups or departments are found in only one third of the nation's colleges and universities. Finally, it has to be realized that the graduate programs make up just over one third of all geography departments and concentrations of geography faculty. This is the geographic pyramid. It begins at a broad base and narrows quickly to the top. While it must be realized that not all geography programs should have graduate offerings, it does point out that much of the work we see in the literature and many of the geographers that are familiar to us come from a relatively few institutions. The recent article in the Journal of Geography,<sup>1</sup> analyzing undergraduate geography departments, clearly illustrates this view. As a result, the discipline has tended to focus emphasis upon relatively few large graduate departments of geography. In addition, the literature of many geographical journals would seem to indicate that all geographers are engaged in pushing back the frontiers of knowledge and that in more than a few instances

DIAGRAM I  
The Geographic Pyramid



Source: Schwendeman 1980.

they are communicating their research to a relatively small and elite group of scholars. Furthermore, when we think of certain programs or individuals associated with them it is to the realm of scholarship that our minds are drawn. While these geographers hold great sway in the discipline, while their names are well known and their work gives visibility to the discipline, the majority of geographers do not share their experiences.

The "average" geographer does not have the time, facilities or graduate students to help undertake large scale research projects or to publish in-depth scholarly research, even on an infrequent basis. For most geographers, teaching takes up inordinate amounts of time, together with committee work, advising students and the like. Teaching several different preparations a year, with 12, 15 or more contact hours a week in the classroom, the "average" geographer is hard pressed just to keep abreast of the current literature. Perhaps the time has come for the discipline to take a fresh look at the role of teaching in geography. To assess its importance and the value that it has in the long run growth and development of the discipline.

In academia times are hard at many institutions. Faculty face retrenchment and numerous departments are having budgets reduced. These effects are having the greatest impact in what are called the "non-essential programs" or in those with low enrollments. Unfortunately, geography is often found in one or both of the above categories. The fact that Schwendemman noted in 1973 that geography was

taught in only 63 percent of institutions of higher learning and that by 1980 that figure had dropped to 50 percent, is not encouraging.<sup>2</sup> The time has come for individual faculty, departments and the discipline as a whole to review its strengths and weaknesses, to hold on to what gains have been made and to push into new areas or at least expand the areas presently held:

Regrettable as it may be for our discipline, most students go to college with little or no formal coursework in geography. In addition, many have a totally incorrect impression of the nature and significance of the work we do. While this points out an area that needs more and continued attention, it is at the college level that the best returns can be made on the profession's investment in teaching. This does not mean that we should abandon geography in the high schools, far from it. It is more a matter of emphasis, in that the greatest numbers of geographers are to be found in the colleges of this nation and thus the greatest return on investment can be made in that area. After success in the college ranks, the discipline can greatly step up its efforts to improve its status in the school systems and in the business world; moving from a situation of strength rather than trying to spread its resources too thinly over many areas at the same time. It is imperative, therefore that we establish priorities and adhere to them.

Probably the majority of professional geographers had their first real contact with the discipline as college undergraduates rather than

as high school students. This indicates that many of the students entering colleges have only minimal knowledge about geography and hence little, if any, desire to specialize in the discipline. Thus the question must be raised as to how students are attracted to the discipline in college. They are probably not attracted by the reputation or achievements of leaders of the discipline, for the vast majority of undergraduates in geography courses could not probably name any of these scholars or their contributions to the literature. Many students are not attracted by the name of geography either and most are unaware of the nature of the discipline or opportunities that are available for trained geographers. They are most likely attracted to a first course in geography by the reputation of the instructor (being an excellent teacher) or the course (being interesting, different or just plain good). Perhaps the reasons for taking that first course in geography are purely spurious. Whatever the reason, the student in that first course is exposed to the field of geography and this represents an important building block for the profession. Students realizing that this field of study exists now are exposed to its orientation, its special way of looking at phenomena, its methods of working and its applications to real world situations. If appropriately stimulated their intellectual curiosity can lead them to take other geography courses. But what is it that raises their conscientious level about geography? What can get them to continue geographic study? Probably the answer lies in the effective transmission of information



and experiences in the classroom, the laboratory and in the field. In essence, what is being emphasized here is good teaching.

It is from the ranks of the undergraduate geographers that the graduate programs are maintained and John Frazier Hart goes so far as to cast the graduate program as "parasites" in this relationship.<sup>3</sup> It is from the graduate programs that the leaders of the profession are produced and it is these individuals as a group who advance the techniques, the scholarship and the stature of the discipline. Thus at the regional and national meetings the leading geographers emphasize research. Little is done to determine the needs of those geographers who spend much of their professional time teaching yet limited surveys have indicated that the scholarly emphasis at conferences is not meeting the needs of many geographers.<sup>4</sup> The time is ripe, therefore, for the discipline to reevaluate its commitment to the teaching of geography and to do so from two perspectives: (i) developing or disseminating new techniques and approaches to the teaching of geography; and (ii) supplying current information to faculty in a readily usable form.

To these ends closer ties between the various professional organizations should be initiated so that increased mutual cooperation can benefit the essential silent majority of geography faculty. Increased output in the resource materials area, especially emphasizing recent developments in areas of broad and general appeal would be of value. In the Resource Papers for College Geography series of the Association

of American Geography, Muller's work on suburbia<sup>5</sup> and Monmonier's cartographic study<sup>6</sup> are excellent examples of the types of work needed. Further, a series on the development of teaching and techniques of analysis would be of value and the CATMOG series of the University of East Anglia, in England, could serve as the model for the analytical mode.

Given the geographic pyramid with the large number of geographers spending much more of their time in teaching and related areas rather than research and given that many of the professional geographers were attracted initially to the discipline for reasons other than its research output or scholarly reputation, the time has come to place renewed emphasis upon the teaching side of the discipline both in terms of fiscal and data resources as well as techniques. While this emphasis on teaching should not be at the total expense of research and academic development it must be implemented. Such a move would strengthen the foundation of the geography and possibly attract people who might become the leaders of the profession in years to come. The discipline cannot afford to permit the teaching sector to continue playing such a minor role in the profession. It is imperative that we improve and expand the base of the geographic pyramid as soon as possible; excellence in teaching is the way to reach this goal.

At the same time that geographers at the national level need to be assessing the nature of our professional organizations, there need to be departmental level reviews. It is in the department that the

positive results of geography's growth can be felt, both directly and at a personal level. The greater the number of students enrolling in geography courses, the greater the potential number of majors. As we all know, student demand is an important variable in academia today, especially in times of declining enrollments. Departments that can hold their own, or grow, will survive. The important question to be answered is how can this be achieved for geography?

Since the first contact of many students with geography is in college at the introductory level, it is imperative that great efforts be placed here. The introductory course or courses should be staffed by the most effective teachers. The visual materials provided for each course must be first rate and course content carefully monitored so as to keep it current and stimulating. Why is this so important? It is vital that the first contact that the undergraduate has with geography be a positive experience and one that is intellectually stimulating. Furthermore, the student must be made aware of the nature and scope of geography, be it from a physical, human or regional perspective. Once the student is exposed to a solid well taught and relevant introductory course in geography, he/she may take others, thus increasing their spatial skills and awarenesses, while at the same time building up the geography enrollments. As mundane and un-academic, as they might be regarded, these enrollments are of importance, for without students, geography departments will cease to exist. It must be stated at this juncture that the content of

geography (its techniques and research for example) does play a very important role here for it shows the student what the discipline has accomplished and what future opportunities exist. Thus, while the thrust of this treatise is to emphasize teaching, it should not be taken as an attack upon scholarship. Both of these college functions can and do exist in a symbiotic relationship. Research illustrates what it is that geographers do, the special skills and the techniques that they have developed to further geographic study. Teaching must build upon this base to stimulate future geographers as well as provide that enrollment base to keep the operational unit of the department alive.

This relationship between scholarship and teaching is an important one. Both academic functions require each other and because of this we must reward those faculty who excel in each endeavor. Here at the department level rewards for teaching are not usually as frequent as those for scholarship. It is highly probable that for scholarship evaluation of quality is easier to do, primarily because we place great trust in the objective detached professionals who referee the book, article and grant proposal manuscripts. If these manuscripts are accepted, they have a stamp of approval on them, thus making much easier the departmental assessments of the quality of faculty research. Hence, promotions and salary increases based upon these external reviews are more frequent than is the case for other departmental academic activities such as teaching, committee work and

the like. This situation must change. Rewards should be balanced and more equal emphasis given to other professional activities, especially teaching.

Teaching consumes much of the time of many geographers and since it can play such a vital role in determining the strength of departments, measured in terms of majors counts and enrollments, it is imperative that departments of geography develop more precise mechanisms for evaluating the caliber of instruction. This is a difficult task, more difficult than assessing the value of publications in well known journals, for example. Furthermore, there must be a wider range of inputs into the evaluative process, by means of student and course surveys for example. In addition, it is vital that as strong a case as possible be made by assessing the total teaching process; the grade distribution given by the instructor, work assigned to the class and the use of teaching techniques such as projects, papers and field trips. While these are difficult elements to assess they are vital in determining the quality of instruction.

Once the quality of instruction has been found to be high, every attempt must be made to ensure rewards for that individual faculty member responsible. By supporting teaching, in terms of allocating resources and rewards to it, faculty will be stimulated to place emphasis here, rather than view teaching as an unrewarded necessity of their job. If teaching is put on a par with research for rewards and budget allocations, then the department will benefit greatly

through the improvement in the instruction of its students.

Work with students, however, must also go beyond the classroom. Many students have few if any real faculty contacts and even those with their advisor may not be that good. It is imperative that the geography department develop the reputation of being open and eager to help students. This reputation can draw students to the discipline and once there, the geographers can demonstrate the value of our field. In addition, geography honor societies (Gamma Theta Upsilon), geography clubs, sponsored talks and other campus activities can help to bring geography to the attention of students on campus.

Geography departments must also be active in campus affairs for the greater the visibility a department has, the greater chances it has of fending off negative forces such as budget cuts. This is especially true if the geographers sit on university committees of substance, especially those dealing with curricular and budgetary matters. To have a voice on those important committees can correct misconceptions about the department from uninformed committee members and prevent geography departments from even being reviewed for cuts.

While enrollments are being increased and while geography's visibility on campus is growing, it is imperative that the department look inwardly and assess its own strengths to meet future challenges and trends. It is imperative that the geographers keep abreast of

the times, to identify the needs of the students, the job market and the changing orientation of the discipline. Geography departments that are dynamic will succeed because they will always offer programs in demand by the students. This may necessitate individual changes in teaching specialities but since the average person can be expected to change jobs several times during a working career, it is not unrealistic to ask the geographer to develop expertise in certain areas so that the departmental course offerings can remain current. While such change may require a great deal of work on the part of the individual, it should be regarded as a positive investment in one's career, as the faculty member will be more marketable and will have a greater role to play in the course offerings of the department. This extra work can be eased if other faculty are willing to be flexible and undertake some of the assignments of the professor who is developing a new course. Such mutual help will foster a sense of community and make it easier and more likely for faculty to generate change on their own, if they find a responsive departmental atmosphere. Once more, the evaluative and rewards system should reflect these efforts by the faculty and thus be supportive incentives. Furthermore, it should be realized by the individual faculty member that retraining can have positive rewards in revitalizing ones scholarly interests as well as increasing job security.

Today in academia geography departments are being cut at a time when the country needs to have a more global perspective, in our

nation's affairs. For decades it has been realized that the USA has a world role to play if only as a means of securing the resources necessary for our industry. It is embarrassing to hear of students who do not know where Iran or Afghanistan or Nicaragua are located. Such people have only a limited spatial perspective of the world in which they live and in a nation that is a world leader this situation must be corrected. Thus, in addition to the many offerings that geography can make through research, it also has a vital role to play in informing the future leaders of society still in our colleges of the world in which we live. This cannot be done effectively if our enrollments decline, if the numbers of geography faculty are reduced and if geography departments are closed.

At all levels of domestic and international affairs the need to maintain the perspective, skills and knowledge that can be imparted by geographers is great. With a renewed emphasis upon teaching, with rewards given for excellence in this area, geography can grow and play a greater role in higher education and beyond. It must be stressed, however, that emphasis should also be given to the schools and to research. But if the mainstay of geography, the undergraduate programs, is not fostered then the roots in the schools and the branches in the graduate programs will not survive. To nourish this system we must put renewed emphasis and vigor into college teaching of geography at the undergraduate level. Geography can and will grow if the discipline turns more of its resources and energies



towards improving teaching in the colleges and universities of this country.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>A. de Souza (et. al.) "The Overlooked Departments of Geography," Journal of Geography, Vol. 80, No. 5, September-October 1981, pp. 170-5.

<sup>2</sup>J.R. Schwendeman, Sr., and J.R. Schwendeman, Jr., Directory of College Geography of the United States: Academic Year 1972-1973 page 1 and the 1980 edition (edited by D.R. Monsebroten) page 1. Richmond, Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky University.

<sup>3</sup>J.F. Hart "The Undergraduate Major Programs in Geography," Association of American Geographers, Publication No. 6, (Washington, D.C.; 1968) p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>M. Fairweather "Geography in the Community College Curriculum: The Case of New York State" forthcoming in Resources in Education (1982).

<sup>5</sup>P.O. Muller, "The Outer City: Geographical Consequences of the Urbanization of the Suburbs," Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1975.

<sup>6</sup>M.S. Monmonier, "Maps, Distortion, and Meaning," Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1975.