

Geography and a Liberal Education

The job prospects for geographers have brightened considerably in recent years. This is encouraging for a discipline that has sometimes struggled to convince students (and their parents) that studying geography can expand employment options. As we celebrate, however, we should not lose sight of geography as a fundamental component of a liberal education.

A liberal education helps people appreciate who they are, where they have come from, and how humans seek to comprehend and shape their world. Moreover, it offers students the conceptual, linguistic, mathematical, and technical skills to evaluate critically the ideas and practices that surround them. As such, a liberal education should unquestionably include geography. Who we are is shaped in part by where we are. Human interactions with each other and the environment are rooted in geographical understandings, as well as the opportunities and constraints of geographical circumstance. Geographical approaches and techniques offer critical insights into everything from local land-use decisions to international conflict.

Despite geography's apparent relevance to a liberal education, it is not often thought of in these terms. Part of the explanation lies in geography's relegation in the public imagination to an exercise in place name memorization. Yet this is not the entire picture. Even those with some understanding of recent developments in geography often view it primarily as a set of tools that can facilitate city planning, environmental decision making, and the like. The recent article in *Nature* highlighting the growing importance of geographic technologies would have lacked any reference to the importance of broader geographic understanding if AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson had not been consulted.

Should we worry about this state of affairs? At least three considerations suggest that we should. First, we are in a weak position to advance geography's long-term position in the academy if we fail to make the case for geography's role in a liberal education. This might seem

counterintuitive at a time when universities are tending to operate more and more like businesses—measuring a program's success by job placements and the like. Yet, unless the mission of a liberal education is abandoned altogether (something I admittedly worry about), the university's core will continue to be defined by inquiries that push the boundaries of our conceptual universe. Geography can and should demonstrate its relevance to such an endeavor. Certainly any effort to reestablish geography departments in so-called elite universities must emphasize its role in a liberal education. Such institutions might hire geographers in support of particular research projects or training initiatives, but they will not make a central place for our discipline if they see it simply as a producer of tools—no matter how useful or widespread those tools might be.

In a more purely philosophical vein, asserting geography's role in a liberal education is of importance if we care about the character of a liberal education itself. The lack of a critical geographical perspective is evident in everything from rampant insensitivities about the impacts of individual actions on the environment to the deteriorating international scene. Can we afford not to argue passionately for geography as a core component of the liberal arts and sciences? The current debate over the future of area studies programs demonstrates the urgency of the matter. There are moves afoot to marginalize or eliminate area studies programs that do not have an instrumentalist agenda closely tied to particular U.S. government policy initiatives. Is it not imperative that geographers make a strong case for an approach to area studies that is rooted in a tradition of open inquiry and the critical examination of issues and developments?

A third argument for geography's role in a liberal education concerns the leading edge of the discipline's expanding job market:

geospatial technologies. As anyone with serious geographic training knows, every layer in a GIS involves decisions about data aggregation and prioritization that reflect particular geographical ideas and assumptions. This is easily obscured when a neat-looking final product emerges, and it is easily overlooked by the legions of GIS users who have never thought about geography. Does this mean that geospatial technologies have no place in a liberal education?

To the contrary, their growing use and research potential make them indispensable to the liberal arts and sciences. The challenge is to treat them as such. As proponents of the turn toward GIScience have long recognized, an approach to geospatial technologies that is sensitive to underlying concepts and principles is critical to advancing research

frontiers, even as it opens the door for increasing participation by geographers in an array of large-scale scientific, technical, and planning initiatives.

The forgoing suggests a number of challenges for geography. As we trumpet new vocational opportunities for geographers, we should couch them in terms of the critical analytical insights and opportunities that geography can offer. As we make the case for geography to university administrators, we should ground our arguments in the contributions of geography (including GIScience) to the liberal arts and sciences. When we teach our courses, we should ensure that we are not simply walking students through geographic "facts" or software manuals, but teaching them to think. And when we reevaluate and reinvent our programs, we should make sure we promote a mix of literacy, numeracy, and geographical understanding that can facilitate critical insight and analysis. What is at stake is not only geography itself, but the very future of a liberal education. ■



Murphy

Alexander B. Murphy
abmurphy@uoregon.edu