

## THE ISSUE OF PROFESSIONAL STANDING IN GEOGRAPHY

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The employability of geography graduates is determined by a whole host of factors. If we leave aside those which have to do with the individual, such as grades and the type of degree obtained, and those which have to do with the quality of the education which the individual received, we are left with a set which depends on the discipline itself and its standing in the minds of potential employers. In some ways these are the factors over which we have least control, because they depend ultimately on the image of geography and geographers in the minds of a very large and diverse group of people. And although images are created and destroyed every day by the advertizing industry, the methods commonly employed are unlikely to be acceptable to the majority of professional geographers, to put it mildly.

The image of professional standing of geography and geographers is seen in very obvious and overt ways: for example in the degree to which the discipline is recognized in government hiring practices and whether geographers are regarded as qualified for certain jobs. It also appears much more subtly in the willingness of geography graduates to use the discipline as their first point of reference in describing themselves. After all, "geographer" is probably much less meaningful to most people than "economist". This is not to suggest that geographers are in any way unique in this regard: what word describes a graduate of a program in physical education, or even an English major? But the observation does suggest that the professional image, or standing, of geography is not as high as that of, say, engineering.

There is considerable disagreement within the discipline over the need, if any, for improvement in professional standing, and the appropriate ways of achieving it. This paper discusses the historical trends which have occurred, and are occurring, in the professional standing of the discipline, and the various ways in which these trends can be interpreted. This is followed by a discussion of the components contributing to geography's current standing, and of the ways in which it is reflected in various institutions and practices, and consequently of the directions which should be taken by any concerted effort to enhance it.

## HISTORICAL TRENDS

The first courses in geography at The University of Western Ontario were offered in 1938, and the department was created in 1948. From then until the late 1960's the primary objective of the department's undergraduate programs was seen as the training of teachers: the Honours program was designed specifically as the basis for high school teaching in geography. As a result the introduction of geography as a university discipline merely served to reinforce the image of the subject which was current at that period in the schools: as a useful component of knowledge and education, certainly, but without any strong concept of application to the development of public policy, or direct usefulness in the solution of the problems of any company or agency, let alone society's.

The demand for high school teachers of geography dropped dramatically in the 1970's, leading to equally dramatic changes in the job opportunities open to our graduates. Teaching remains a realistic option for our students, but the changing pattern of supply and demand has allowed the colleges of education to raise their admission standards to the point where they are in some cases higher than those of other professional programs such as law. It has also produced drastic changes in the way the discipline is taught in the high schools, but that issue is outside the scope of this paper. Although high school geography departments are still largely staffed by Honours graduates of the 1960's and early 1970's, it is estimated that in some jurisdictions as few as 50% of the courses taught by geographers are in geography, and as few as 50% of geography courses are actually taught by geographers.

The slump in teaching opportunities coincided with a dramatic increase in public sector employment in government ministries, Conservation Authorities and local government. For a period of about ten years this sector was able to absorb much of the slack created by the loss of teaching jobs. The combination of social and natural science gave geography graduates an edge over many other disciplines in competing for the jobs created by the new concern for environmental issues and natural resource management. But by the end of the 1970's this stream had slowed to a trickle as governments reduced their rates of growth and substituted short-term for long-term employment, or filled their vacant positions with science specialists. If growth has occurred in any field in the 1980's, it has been in public sector areas such as real estate, urban development, retail site selection and consulting, which continue to attract a large proportion of our students.

These changes in employment prospects have filtered back into the teaching curriculum. To train geography teachers a department used to need a full range of systematic and regional offerings. The applied skills needed by

natural resource managers or real estate developers have created a demand for many more vocational courses in areas such as retailing geography and natural hazards. Many departments now offer specialized programs aimed at particular employment prospects, while entire degrees can now be taken in applied geography. All of these changes can be seen as adaptations to new job opportunities, and a changing image of the nature of geography and its role in society, in both cases without historical precedent.

What are the implications of these changes for the professional standing of geography? There are two commonly held points of view, one pessimistic and one optimistic. The pessimistic, which will be referred to as the "deep trouble" position, holds that geography has grown increasingly desperate as each new field of employment has dried up. Although new fields may be found, an increasingly frantic search will bring diminishing credibility and remove whatever professional standing the discipline may once have had. On the other hand, the "just peaking" view holds that in the longer historical term geography has had no traditional image except as a high school topic, and is only now establishing itself as a legitimate training. Geographers are emerging from more universities and in larger numbers than ever before and are beginning to give the discipline a professional standing, something it has not enjoyed to date in any substantial sense. From this point of view there is a pressing need for efforts to be made to create an image for geography as a profession, and for the training which geographers have received.

Within the discipline reactions vary widely. We might choose to argue that geography is not in any way a training for employment, but instead analogous to other liberal arts, such as history and English, which are desirable for the general education which they give, and which provide strong foundations for later, more vocational training at the graduate level or on the job. Another point of view is that any attempt to affect professional standing can only backfire, since lobbying and promotion are unacceptable activities for professionals and will only confirm an image of insecurity in the minds of others. One might even extend this argument to suggest that it is precisely such activities in the past which have created the present (and by implication regrettable) standing of geography. Equally one might argue that these concerns for professional standing are not new but have existed within the discipline for many years, and that all previous efforts to deal with them have failed to improve the position of geography. All of these points of view argue against any attempt to influence the image of the discipline.

Two lines of argument support some degree of concerted action. First, one might argue that it is only by constantly drawing attention to itself that a discipline like

geography can survive in the competitive market for job opportunities. In this version of professional Darwinism it is only the fittest and most aggressive disciplines which can survive, if survival implies a constant flow of employment opportunities for graduates. Second, and more directly, the "just peaking" viewpoint defined above implies the need for geographers to promote themselves in order to obtain the professional standing which this relatively young discipline deserves.

## COMPONENTS OF PROFESSIONAL STANDING

### 1. Perceptual

The notion of professional standing was introduced earlier in terms of image, or those intangible factors which influence the meaning that the public, in general, and employers, in particular, attach to the terms geography and geographer. As we shall see later, perception is only part of the complete picture, as the standing of geographers as professionals may also be thought of as a legislative issue, and may also be determined to some extent by the organizations which exist to represent geographers at the regional and national levels.

Geography has a well-defined subject matter, but no monopoly over it. For example, one could find studies of the spatial distribution of diseases which have been instrumental in determining causes and sometimes even cures, and make an indisputable case for the social importance of the spatial analysis paradigm. But unfortunately geography and geographers have no unique claim to such studies, and indeed epidemiologists can rightly claim to have been using similar techniques with great success for much longer. To be successful in the job market, geographers must be able to claim not a unique subject matter, but a unique set of skills and tools. It must be clear precisely what it is that a graduate of applied geography is able to supply.

It is tempting to look for uniqueness in the generality of a geographic training, or in the combination of natural and social sciences which it offers. Some years ago the Association of American Geographers made a more deliberate effort to improve the perception of the abilities of geography graduates by publishing a brochure, aimed at potential employers, which listed specific skills, and gave examples of the ways in which they could be applied in different fields. Geography is specified as a field in a depressingly small number of job descriptions, at a rate which is clearly inconsistent with our own feelings about the usefulness of the discipline. Realistically, geography is listed as an acceptable qualification mostly in cases where a geographer is directly involved in writing the job description. If

this situation is to change, it will be through the widespread acceptance that there are certain skills which any geography graduate can be expected to possess.

The lack of a clear meaning to the label "geographer" is evident in other situations as well. Advertising oneself as a "consulting geographer" would suggest very little in any concrete way about the topics on which one could offer advice. Although it might attract a certain amount of curiosity, it would certainly suggest much less than, say, "consulting biologist". And it is easy to find geography graduates, some even with advanced degrees, who will only reluctantly admit to having been trained as geographers.

### 2. Legislation

The standing of many professions is secured by legislation, which provides for the control of many aspects of the operation of the profession. In recent years there has been a distinct tendency in many countries to extend legislation from older professions such as medicine to newer ones such as psychology. The law then provides for accreditation of training programs, licensing of professionals, regulating aspects of practice, such as fee schedules and advertising, and self-policing.

Recently, one of the disciplines to lobby for professional legislation has been geology, particularly in Alberta. It is naturally in the interests of the profession seeking legislation to establish the boundaries of its discipline as widely as possible, and there is a clear area of overlap between geology and geography in the area of geomorphology, with the result that the lobbying effort, and others like it, could be seen by some as constituting a threat to the freedom of geographers to practice their profession. One response would be for geographers to lobby equally strongly for professional legislation of their own, or at least to prevent further encroachment. However, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to establish professional legislation for a discipline as broad and indefinite as geography, or to set up an effective system of professional accreditation. The best protection would therefore appear to be an effective defence, with a central group able to present strong arguments to safeguard the interests of geographers in the face of potential encroachment by neighbouring professions.

### 3. Organizations

Another component of the professional standing of a discipline consists of the organizational structures which exist within it. Academic geography in Canada is represented by the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) with approximately 1200 members of whom roughly one half are academics, the rest being teachers or non-academic professionals. The CAG offers its members two periodicals, The Canadian Geographer, which follows the editorial policy

of a learned journal, and The Operational Geographer, which carries news items and short papers and is directed at the profession as a whole. The CAG has a total membership which is of the same order of magnitude of one year's production of geography graduates in Canada.

In this and in other aspects of its operation the CAG functions along the lines of a learned society. It organizes an annual meeting at which papers are presented on recent research, receives grants from both the Natural Science and Engineering Council of Canada and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and has low fees and only one full-time staff member. This is very different from the model of a professional society, set up to serve the interests of a profession. On this model, the CAG would maintain and staff a central office, probably in Ottawa, from which it could lobby the federal government on behalf of the profession and work to obtain greater media exposure for geographers. It would publish a periodical more along the lines of a trade magazine; and its fees would be at least twice as high as they are now.

A number of other organizations exist in addition to the CAG with some responsibility to serve the interests of geography. The National Committee for Geography represents the discipline internationally, particularly in the International Geographical Union. Teachers are of necessity represented by provincial organizations such as the Ontario Association of Geography and Environmental Educators, although many are also members of the National Council of Geographic Educators in the US. Finally the activities of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (RCGS) have a strong impact on geography in Canada, particularly through the publication of the Canadian Geographic. But it is quite clear that no effective organization exists at present to serve the interests of professional geography as a whole, and particularly those professionals employed outside educational institutions. In reality the vast majority of geography graduates lose their ties to the discipline almost as soon as they complete their education. Yet this is clearly the group that can benefit the most from an enhanced professional standing for the discipline, and that can contribute most effectively to that objective.

In his past presidential address to the annual convention of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in Detroit in April, 1985, Pierce Lewis argued that the future health of geography depends on the extent to which it is able to appeal to an even larger source of potential support than the two groups already mentioned, school teachers and nonacademic professionals. This is the public at large, and the considerable natural enthusiasm which the latter displays for learning more about the world. The enormous circulation of National Geographic, the income which people are willing to expend on tourism and continuing support of

expeditions of various kinds are all indicators of a deep and pervasive need which academic geography has increasingly failed to satisfy in the past decades. In order to gain respectability and professional standing as a discipline, academic organizations such as the CAG and AAG distanced themselves from their more popular counterparts, the RCGS and National Geographic Society (NGS). Lewis argued that it was in fact this very basic enthusiasm, not the drier more abstract objectives of academic geography, which brought most academics into the field, and it is this same enthusiasm which must be tapped if geography is to enhance its own professional standing in the mind of the public.

#### POSSIBLE ACTIONS

As we have seen, there are strong arguments both for and against any deliberate attempt to enhance the professional standing of geography, and thereby to influence the employment prospects of its graduates. To explore these further, and to consider the possible courses of action open to it, the CAG Executive Committee formed a Subcommittee on Professional Standing in 1985 with a mandate to "review the status of, and recommend CAG policy with respect to the professional standing of Geographers in Canada". The Subcommittee includes strong representation from nonacademic geographers, and is chaired by Roger Tomlinson, a consulting geographer. The other members are Gordon Nelson, University of Waterloo, Derek Ford, McMaster University, Nelson Riis, MP, Ted Manning, Environment Canada, Robert Scace, consultant with a prominent engineering firm, and the author.

Some time ago the AAG began a program of actions designed to tackle some of the issues discussed above. The central office staff in Washington was enlarged with the addition of an executive director and press officer, plus necessary support, to begin strengthening relations with the media, increase lobbying efforts on behalf of the discipline, and improve communications between the central office and members, particularly nonacademics. Membership fees were increased by a factor of almost two to pay for the increased expenses. This is far short of the model of a professional society, but represents a much more aggressive stance than previously, and a significant departure from the model of a learned society. In addition the AAG has begun to form stronger ties with the NGS, which has begun publication of a research journal and has initiated a program of support for academic research.

The AAG program would clearly need modification if it were to be adopted in the Canadian context, but it is a useful model for discussion. The RCGS is somewhat analogous to the NGS, since the Canadian Geographic fills a similar niche in Canada to the National Geographic in the United States. However, geography has traditionally played a much stronger

role in Canadian schools than in the United States, and the nature of the Canadian Federation and the provincial responsibility for education are significant factors which must be taken into account in any discussion.

Besides the role of the CAG, the Subcommittee has discussed the need for several other forms of action. There are indications that a great deal can be achieved by persistent lobbying to improve job opportunities in the public sector, through better recognition of geography as a qualification. The Subcommittee is also working on a draft brochure describing and defining the skills which geography graduates can offer to potential employers. If approved the brochure could be given very broad circulation in both government and the private sector. It could include examples in the form of brief career profiles of successful graduates. A series of articles in suitable journals and magazines could give additional exposure to the skills which geographers possess and the types of jobs for which geographers would be ideally suited.

One of the best methods of exposing geography to the media, and improving the public's perception of the role geographers can play, is in the development of public policy. There are frequent opportunities for groups to present briefs to government on issues, but to do so requires rapid communication between a permanent representative close to government and members capable of providing views. Without a central office in Ottawa or permanent staff the CAG is unable to respond to these opportunities except in unusual circumstances.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Opinions vary as to whether one should be optimistic or pessimistic about the current employment prospects for geography graduates in Canada, but none would argue that they could not be better. An individual's own grades and abilities are to some extent his or her own responsibility, but the degree to which job prospects are affected by the image or standing of geography as a discipline and profession is surely a collective one, and a reasonable topic for debate within the organizations which represent the profession.

There seems to be little doubt that geography in Canada does not enjoy the same standing as a profession as other disciplines, for example engineering. One may of course respond to this by arguing that geography is not a profession, that a degree in geography is not and should not be treated as a qualification for specific types of employment, and that the organization which represents academic geographers in Canada should not present itself as attractive to geography graduates in nonacademic employment. However the responses which the Subcommittee has received from the

membership of the CAG in response to a general request for comment suggest that this is not a widely held, or at least widely expressed view.

Given the acceptance of some level of collective responsibility, there are nevertheless powerful arguments against any form of collective action. Some might feel that the image of a discipline is no more than the sum of the images of its individual practitioners, so that our future is best assured by encouraging individual excellence. There is no doubt that recognition of the work of individuals can reflect on the whole discipline. Others might feel that any collective effort on behalf of an academic discipline is unseemly, or encourages mediocrity. There is also the view that these same concerns have existed for decades, and that an aging group of academic geographers is increasingly jaded and less inclined to take necessary initiatives.

The "just peaking" position outlined above suggests otherwise. It argues that in the longer historical view geography is an emerging discipline which must begin to justify itself to the larger community, and to create the job opportunities for its graduates which it believes it deserves. It needs a strong, central, permanent staff acting on its behalf to make the necessary representations to government, coordinate exposure to the media, and mobilize the potential which exists both in academic and nonacademic geography. It needs to build on the strengths not only of academics but also of nonacademic professionals and teachers, and to exploit the ability of geography to capture the popular imagination.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>All estimates, used in this paper, are derived from discussions with chairpersons of university geography departments.