

1983 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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The Meaning and Importance of Geographic Knowledge

Over the past several years national attention has periodically focused on the lack of basic geographic knowledge and world awareness among American college students. Studies by individual faculty, by major educational organizations and even by the national pollsters all report that among U.S. college students there exists a glaring inadequacy or weakness in place identification and associated geographic knowledge.

Geographical Illiteracy

Recently, the results of a simple place name identification exercise at a nearby university (University of Miami) were catapulted from an instructor's memo to his colleagues, to the student newspaper, to the *Miami Herald* and local papers, to local radio and television news shows, and finally to live and taped appearances on "Good Morning America" and the NBC "Nightly News." This, in turn, spawned even more national and international coverage. The astonishingly poor performance of that introductory geography class even made Johnny Carson's "monologue" (Helgren 1983). At the least, one can conclude that geographic ignorance is newsworthy.

A survey of American college students by one of the nation's leading educational testing services also concluded that our students' knowledge of geography, or global awareness as it was called, was appallingly low. The director of the survey was quoted as saying that students "don't seem to have [the] basic knowledge that would be required to understand in any meaningful way what is going on in the world" (Elson 1982, p. E-4).

Geographic Knowledge and Global Systems

These events have helped bring to national attention what geographers and many others already knew. The American educational system does not place

significant emphasis on modern geographic knowledge and understanding. Among the developed nations of the world we are weak in this respect. This lack of emphasis on world geography, on the similarities and differences among nations and peoples, on the interrelationships of social, political, economic and physical resource systems can be attributed to the relatively low level of communication and contact among the businesses and peoples of the United States and the economies and cultures of the rest of the globe. One can, in fact, suggest that our relatively low level of communication and contact with the rest of the world is a result of our size, our location, and the rich diversity of the physical and human resources within our country. That is, the lack of emphasis on world geography can be said to be a result of the geography of the United States itself.

In any event, there remains the glaring fact of the paucity of American students' geographic knowledge, standing in sharp contrast to such knowledge among student in other developed countries. These nations are characterized by relatively high volumes of international trade and a corresponding need for information about and comprehension of other places.

With the continuing and very significant growth of multinational enterprise and the increasing importance of international trade, both in terms of markets for our products and the sources of essential raw materials (particularly oil) and other imports, the need for a better understanding of the diversity in the world should be obvious. Awareness of the national character and interrelatedness of the social, political, economic and physical resource systems, and the understanding of the linkages of these systems with corresponding systems elsewhere, is essential in an age of global interdependence. Such knowledge, geographical in context, expression and interpretation, can foster a greater awareness of and sensitivity to other societies and cultures; and such geographic knowledge can encourage economic development as potential opportunities for trade are recognized and acted upon. The strengthening of our economic and social well-being, and the economic well-being of our trading partners, is a worthy goal in this increasingly competitive and, we hope, cooperative world.

Geographic Knowledge and Public Policy

The lack of geographic knowledge and understanding is also apparent at other scales of analysis. I draw the following examples from some of my own research, research that has public policy implications. As an urban geographer, I study metropolitan areas. Metropolitan areas are dynamic regions. People and

businesses do not remain where they were indefinitely. Characteristics of places change over time, often in complex but usually in explainable ways. Geographic change is typically orderly and thus, in principle, predictable. However, without an understanding of the forces and processes that underlie geographic change, the observer will often miss forest for trees.

The Changing Social Geography of Broward County

Several years ago, many western Broward County parents disagreed with a proposed revision of school district boundaries. Opposition to the plan centered on the boundaries proposed for two new high schools opening the following fall. Parents were dismayed when, according to the plan, students within close walking distance of the new schools were to continue to be sent long distances to central and eastern Broward schools. Racial desegregation issues were loudly debated among the interested and affected parties. Yet, the real source of the dilemma was not racial balance, but a severe mismatch between school locations and the location of students.

This geographic imbalance in schools and students was a result of the orderly and predictable geographic behavior of households. In Broward County, as in many other Florida communities, the economy is largely powered by tourism and retirement, both desirous of coastal or near-coastal locations. In addition to the preferences of retirees and tourists for location close to the ocean, the trade and service industries that meet these sector-demands also have had a strong incentive to locate in that part of the county. The result has been a competition for scarce ocean front land; consequently, land values diminish as the distance from the ocean increases. Not only is land more expensive in the eastern regions of the county, but because of rapid growth in the retirement and tourist sectors, land values in the east have been escalating at a faster pace than land farther west. As land increased in value near the ocean, extensive users of land were driven westward, and intensive users of land increased their share of the eastern part of the county. Hotels, motels and commercial users, multi-family and condominium housing, all greatly increased their share of eastern land; single-family households, particularly those with children, were driven westward in their search for suitable housing.

Planning for Broward's Future

The implications and consequences of this changing geography were not clearly understood by the citizens of Broward County. The pervasiveness and extent of

the spatial change taking place in the county created significant excess capacity in the schools of the eastern and central regions. These seats had to be filled by students brought in from the west, where there was an overabundance of students relative to school capacity. Even in the absence of racial balance issues, such transportation would be required. A greater awareness of the local geography and an understanding of the geographic change could have led to early public discussion of the problem and the formulation of appropriate solutions. Public rhetoric, however, tended to focus on racial balance issues, rather than on the underlying problem of geographic change and locational obsolescence.

I have argued here that a geographic perspective, like many others, can give important and useful information to those who employ it. Whether this perspective is focused on world regions or local areas, or for that matter, at some scale in between, the study of locational similarities and differences, their causes and their consequences, and the study of the process of geographic change are worthy tasks. I have also argued that there is a clear need for improved understanding of the meaning and importance of geographic knowledge. The American people, we can only hope, are awakening to this need.

References

Elson, Mary. 1982. "Geographers blush at our ignorance of what's out there." *Chicago Tribune*, 1 September, pp. E-1, E-4.

Helgren, David M. 1983. "Place name ignorance is national news." *Journal of Geography* 82 (4), pp. 176-8.