

PROJECTING GEOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN IN CANADA

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Geography, Business and Industry Session

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As an academic geographer in a university which prides itself on its links with “the real world,” and a university which has just appointed a geographer as the Dean of its Faculty of Business, I am pleased to respond to David’s examination of the interface between business and geography.

There seem to be two different, though definitely connected, aspects to that interface. One is the way in which rigorous geographic analysis can contribute to business decision-making and enhance profits, and David has illustrated this by his friend, the wine importer, whom he considers to be a rather exceptional case. The second is the way in which a geographic understanding of the world can be a valuable business asset in the 21st century, and this is behind David’s challenge for geographers at universities to really demonstrate geography’s relevance to the public.

I would like to address both aspects. Unlike David, I think geography has made significant connections with the Canadian business community, but clearly those links are not well known. I want to consider why that is so, and what we as geographers can do about it. The first step is to present some of the evidence, which I will do from my own experience at Ryerson.

Then I would like to consider the second aspect, which I think is more problematic: the likelihood that geographic literacy is valued as a business skill. David’s route to business and industry’s appreciation of geography starts with the academic geographer, making the public conscious of the value of geography, which will then be recognized by business and industry. Though I don’t intend to shirk my responsibility as a university professor “to get my hands dirty,” I want to examine that path and propose an alternative.

Being able to apply geographic analysis to solve business problems is not the same as being geographically literate to solve business problems. Each requires its own expertise, though one obviously can enhance the other.

The difference in these two approaches was never made more apparent to me as when, in preparation for this talk, I looked at what the CCGE, the CAG and the AAG have on their websites about careers in geography. I’ll come back to talk more about the CAG website, but here I want to contrast the career profiles contained on the websites of the AAG and the CCGE.

The AAG site has “The Practical Side of Geography – Profiles of Geographers in the Private and Government Sectors” and the 17 people profiled all have degrees in geography, and are working in a variety of areas which one would expect of geographers.¹ Each one discusses how his or her background in geography contributed to

job success. The CCGE site features “Geography on the Job” in eight areas which one would expect of geographers. However, the biologist is a toxicologist; the explorer is a geologist with a “fascination for geography;” the police officer has a criminology degree and has developed the technique of geographic profiling; one of the statisticians has an undergraduate degree in math and science and a Masters in computer science with a specialization in GIS; the person involved in weather is an engineer with an MBA who acknowledges the importance of geography in navigation. The two teachers, the conservationist, the cartographer, and one statistician have geography degrees.²

While the focus for the AAG is: look what you can do with a degree in geography, the message from the CCGE is: look how important geography is not just for those pursuing a geography degree, but for those who don't! It is a very interesting difference given the participation at this symposium and one which we should consider in terms of strategies. Teaching in a program entitled “Geographic Analysis,” I am more comfortable talking about the former, but I realize that this session was set up to discuss more about the latter. I am going to comment on both, however, not just because David did but also because I think both are relevant in projecting geography in the public domain, and they are linked.

David proposes that business and industry are not aware that geography matters. That sentiment, “geography matters,” in fact, is the slogan and on the homepage, of a business in Canada; and that company's parent, the world leader in GIS software, has made efforts to underline the Geography in Geographic Information Systems. For example, it initiated GIS day to promote the importance of geography as well as GIS, and it manages the Geography Network, a global network of users and providers of geographic information.

Another business, Canada's leading spatial data provider, is presently expanding its sales department, cold-calling businesses, to try to sell its products obviously, but in the context of “see what geography can do for you to save you money.” For its existing business clients, the approach is: “See how much more geography can do.” The company has had several job openings in the last month, and all five GIS jobs, ranging from a Senior GIS Specialist Team Leader to a GIS Technician, require that the candidates have, among other things, “an understanding of geography.”

These companies have geographic products and, without doubt, want business and industry to see the value of geography in order to sell their goods. Nonetheless, their promotion of geography is significant. GIS analysts could use GIS software and spatial data without having a geography background, but these tools would not be utilized as effectively because knowing what can be done with them and how to interpret the results are indeed value-added.

There are other businesses too which use geography deliberately. I mentioned at the beginning of my talk about Ryerson's new Dean of the Faculty of Business. In fact, it is Geographer Ken Jones, who won the very first CAG Award for Geography in the Service of Government or Business; he was recognized in 1997 for 25 years of “teaching students how geography applies to business and persuading business people that business needs

geography.”³ Ken’s Centre for the Study of Commercial Activity at Ryerson University now has over 70 members from the public and private sectors.⁴

The major banks, large restaurant chains, real estate companies and many other businesses and industries have professionals with university geography degrees on staff. The Geography Department at Ryerson has over 600 business cards from the graduates of its Program in Geographic Analysis lining the walls, but not one of them says “Geographer.” They say, instead, Business Analyst, Conservation Analyst, Development Analyst, Environmental Planner, GIS Analyst, Information Specialist, Location Analyst, Marketing Database Coordinator, Park Planner, Planning Analyst, Policy Analyst, Research Analyst, Real Estate Representative, and I could go on. These geographers were hired for their analytical abilities. They can take data and turn them into information to provide decision support to business and industry, sometimes but not always, using their GIS and mapping skills; their conceptual understanding of geographic principles and their knowledge about place are critical to their career achievements.

Ryerson graduates are not exceptions, I am sure. Geographers graduate from university and they shed their identification as geographers. They may not present themselves as being geographers in business and industry, but unlike David, I would argue that most are using the talents and the knowledge they gained from their geography degrees. However, since they do not call themselves geographers, they are not recognized as geographers and this contributes to geography’s weak profile in the public domain. The label is important, indeed, crucial, for projecting the relevance of geography. The public still does not know what geographers do, and so it is not conscious of what geography is and does not know why it is important.

In our career-oriented society, it is an easier task to sell geography based on career opportunities than on the need for geographic literacy, and I don’t think we have done enough in the former case. If the CAG is the professional organization for geographers in Canada, where are the non-academic geographers? Why don’t my former students who are working in business and industry feel a kinship with the organization and want to join? This would certainly help them retain their identification as geographers, though obviously there would need to be a reason to become involved in the Association. The AAG has an Applied Geography Specialty group. Has there ever been talk about a similar type of group in the CAG? Why isn’t there a Career link on the CAG website’s home page? Why does the CAG not have a brochure for advertising jobs in geography on its website? As a relatively new member of the CAG who does not know its history first-hand, I see these as simple things that would project geography in the public domain; but I realize that they may not be so simple within the organizational framework. Perhaps if the non-academic geographer is not a good fit with the CAG, we need a separate organization to designate – indeed, to celebrate – the non-academic geographer as a professional. This focus on geography careers in business and industry also relates to the other sessions in this symposium, and I am sure we will talk about careers elsewhere.

I want to turn now to the second, more difficult aspect of the interface between geography and business: the recognition of geographic knowledge as a business asset in

the 21st century. Consider the premise that was stated in the description of this session: “In an era of globalization there appears to be growing demand for a workforce that is geographically literate, especially in terms of human, cultural, and regional geography.” Does anyone see this actually happening in Canada?

As geographers, to us it is obvious that an employee who is geographically literate is an asset to business, and Microsoft may have realized that too, but if there was widespread recognition of such a belief, and thus a growing demand for workers with geographic knowledge, there would be little need for this symposium. Business and industry would be advertising for geographically literate workers; Canadian university geography departments would be flourishing; and high school students increasingly would be selecting social studies or geography as their senior electives. This would be a world in which the public realized consciously that “geography matters,” and it is the creation of this world that we are trying hard to envision at this symposium.

As the CCGE indicated in its profile of “Geography on the Job,” geographic knowledge can contribute to the careers of non-geographers. But for this to be understood, geography has to be appreciated once again, as David has said, as being a “holistic,” “foundation social science.” In a multicultural country and a global economy, one would think that this might be possible, to convince the public that an understanding of the world through geography is fundamental to being a well-educated citizen. But we are also living at a time of growing specialization, an orientation towards skills, and in school, if not elsewhere, an increasing importance placed on mathematics and science. Our task is not so easy. The contribution of geographic literacy is difficult to quantify whereas the contribution of geographic skills is not.

Again, I want to reiterate that these sessions are so inextricably connected, because the understanding of geography as a holistic, relevant discipline has to be apparent in both primary and secondary schools. And if geography is not seen as being an essential subject in school, it will not be seen as an option in university and it will not be valued as an asset regardless of one’s career path.

David suggests that academic geographers can convince the public that geography is relevant by contributing to public policy and, in this way, business and industry will become conscious of geography’s worth. I would argue that geographers already contribute tremendously. Academic geographers act as policy advisors in community health, immigrant settlement, and environmental issues to name a few, but the public doesn’t know it. Geography graduates are employed in municipal and regional planning departments, but they don’t call themselves geographers. David’s plan depends on publicity; hopefully the media session – and also the public policy session – can suggest how geographers’ contributions to public policy can be recognized.

Consider a different direction. Academic geographers have to “get their hands dirty” by making direct contact with business and industry to enlist their support in promoting geography. The CCGE already has a few corporate sponsors through its Great Canadian Geography Challenge. Companies which are part of a global organization like HSBC

Bank Canada acknowledge the importance of geographic literacy with reference to that sponsorship. To quote from the company's statement on the CCGE website: "With more than 9,500 offices in 79 countries and territories we know the value of geographic knowledge. Geography helps us understand different cultures, why things are located where they are and how they relate to our local environment. With a geographical perspective, a person is better prepared to understand, interpret and find his or her place in a changing world."⁵ Businesses located within Canada with a multicultural workforce also need an understanding of diversity which can be achieved through knowledge of cultural geography.

Academic geographers need to collaborate more actively with the CCGE and the RCGS. Are there geographers among the leaders in business and industry? We should know. Where are our former students? We need spokespeople who command – or can create – attention when they speak. We need money and expertise to help us publicize the value of geography.⁶ David suggests that the simplest way to promote geography "is to mount a publicity/advertising campaign." I wouldn't count that out just yet!

Whether it is to promote geographic analysis or geographic literacy in business and industry, it is important to identify non-academic geographers and enlist their support. It is also essential to foster links between geographers in school, university, government, and business and industry. This symposium is doing a tremendous job in that regard.

¹ Association of American Geographers. *The Practical Side of Geography – Profiles of Geographers in the Private and Government Sectors*. [<http://www.aag.org/Careers/profiles.htm>] Accessed May 13, 2005.

² Canadian Council for Geographic Education. *Geography on the Job*. [<http://www.ccege.org/ccge/english/Resources/geoJob/>] Accessed May 13, 2005.

³ Canadian Association of Geographers. *1997 CAG Award for Geography in the Service of Government or Business: Ken G. Jones*. [http://www.cag-acg.ca/en/ken_g_jones.html] Accessed May 18, 2005.

⁴ Centre for the Study of Commercial Activity. *Value of CSCA Membership*. [http://www.cscs.ryerson.ca/Membership_Value_of_Membership.html]. Accessed May 18, 2005.

⁵ HSBC Bank Canada. [<http://www.geochallenge.ca/geochallenge/default.asp>] Accessed May 18, 2005.

⁶ Several of these ideas are not my own. They were discussed on the bus-ride home after hearing Stuart Semple talk about the idea for this symposium at the 2004 Fall meeting of OAGEE.