

# Geography and General Education: The Nexus of Roles in Post-Secondary Education

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**Editor's note:** Professor Robert Harper has been a major contributor to geographic literature and professional writing over the past five decades while holding academic positions at Southern Illinois University and the University of Maryland. His role in geography education has been to ask the questions: Why do we teach geography?; and What is its importance to students who study the discipline as part of their general education? In the following short essay, Professor Harper presents a philosophy of geography and its educational benefits based on many years of observation and practice in higher education. He was unable to present his critical position on this aspect of geography at NCGE. The editors of the journal judged the statement to be both interesting and informative from a practical, as well as, an epistemological point of view. While the paper represents a departure from the normal peer review process, it is included here as a reflection on the post secondary role of geography in American education by one of the discipline's senior scholars. *JS*

My philosophical approach to considering the role of geography in American education begins by identifying its major roles in 21st century academic endeavors. Geographic education has two tasks, 1) to prepare majors and researchers, and 2) to contribute to the education of the general student. The two are entwined, but in terms of numbers of students, the second is by far the more important, both in its impact and qualitative significance to our country and the world.

The overall problem of the necessity for geography education is straight forward. In today's global world it is vital that the general public — from the highest official to the common person — have a basic understanding of how the world, and its parts, works. In general education there is a vital need to

understand the world today, but currently no discipline, including geography, is addressing that issue adequately.

The specific task that is necessary in order to address the issue is readily recognizable. It will require:

1. The aim of the geography taught in schools should be to provide a framework for understanding the world today, from the first geography lesson in the early grades through the general education course in the university.
2. Aiming to understand how humans, and their varied cultures live in the very different environments over the Earth, how they make use of and impact the Earth's ecology, and how environmental conditions impact them.
3. Understanding that at the current time, the world is in a period of transition; there are basically two very different major systems of human existence in the world with each representing about half the world's population. The current system represents a very different world than existed 50, 20, even 10 years ago, and it is changing rapidly. The two systems dominant today are:
  - Locally-based, primarily using the environmental resources within walking distance of where people live, or their residence. This pattern occurs because of traditional isolation and varied local conditions. There are many versions of this, but the important thing is to understand the basics of the relationship between culture and environment in this way of life. This system depends primarily on animate power: animals, human muscles, wind, flowing water, and biofuel in the form of combustible plant life.
  - A global system that is able to contact any of its parts anywhere in the world with modern transport and communications via the Internet. In this system it is possible to move masses of goods from a location to any other location. Goods can be marketed anywhere. Residents in this system can make use of ideas from anywhere and cooperate and collaborate among important innovators anywhere on Earth.
    - a. The name of the game is produce where it is best to produce, manage where it is best to manage, market as widely as possible.
    - b. The primary players in this game are corporations and other businesses that see the whole world as their game board.

Cities become the 'hosting environments' for the global system and locus of business management, the focus of primary movement of money and ideas. The bigger the city the better; the city system is a hierarchy.

- c. In the global world countries are seen as necessary evils to use the best way possible. Countries become sources of cheap labor, protected markets, and tax havens.
- d. Countries and their borders are a creation of the past that do not fit the global system. But, with the power of lawmaking and the power of armies they remain very important. The 200-plus countries in the world are of very different sizes and powers - most are the size of states in the United States and often have a lesser political and economic role than the largest states.
- All of this takes place within the varied environments of Earth's surface. Varied human understandings of the workings of the physical world around us are basic to the working of each system. Earth resources are finite, but the major limits to human life are the particular understandings among the 'natural resources' of the culture and the system.

### What Needs to Happen

Geography's contribution to general education must provide students with a basic understanding of the world today with its two very different systems of life. They are not isolated from one another. The global system needs the resources found in areas of the local system; the local system needs the knowhow and healthcare of the global system. Therefore, we must recognize that:

1. Telling the story of human life in the world today is a very complex issue.
2. Geography has little time in the crowded general education curriculum and there is very little time for geography in a school day, in a semester, from K-12 through college. But, combined there is considerable time.
  - a. The geography curriculum from the lowest grade through Geog. 101 in college must be integrated to tell the story, simply at first, then using the knowledge fleshed out year to

year, filling out the complexities, providing more and more understanding of how the world works.

- b. In such a curriculum, no lesson stands alone. Each must be integral to the course! No specific course stands alone, it must be integral to the curriculum! In each case, at each level: the whole is more than the sum of its parts! (This is equally important in teacher preparation. A geography major is not a collection of hours; each course contributes to an overall perspective.)
- c. In general education understanding geographic concepts such as distance, area, and region become means, not ends in themselves. They do not need to be separately taught, they emerge implicitly as the geography of the world is developed.
- d. In the same way, physical, economic, political, and cultural geography enter into the program, not in themselves, but as part of the understanding of life in the world today.

Gilbert White once said, ‘The aim of geographic education should be, that when a finger is placed on any part of the world, the student is able to explain what it is like there;’ meaning the conditions under which people live and how they fit into the larger world.

### How Can It Be Done?

- It will not be easy. The inertia of educators, teachers, and publishers to something new is pervasive and massive.
- Geography has little clout in the field of education.
- Geographers have a fascination with ‘being scientific’ with ‘geographic concepts’— and that is not what the general student needs to know explicitly.
- We are also fascinated by ‘creative lessons’ that stand alone, but interest students. The power of those lessons must be stitched together into a continuous experience from early grades to post secondary general education courses.

It will require rethinking the entire geography curriculum, developing ways to develop an overall framework of the understanding of human life on Earth that can move from the simplest level in the early grades into more

and more principles and complexity. Students, by the time of high school graduation, must have a basic working understanding of life on Earth in the 21st century.

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