

COMMENTARY:
**Reevaluating the Relationship between High School and
College Geography Education**

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Geography educators have lamented the existence of a gap between high school and college geography education since at least the 1970s, noting how the mid-twentieth century rise of social studies reduced K-12 geography education to rote memorization of “capes and bays” (Harper, 1982; Holcomb, 1974; K. Salter, 1990). First-year college students, they observed, arrived in introductory geography courses in need of immediate indoctrination into “academic” geography’s emphases on space, place, region, and landscape as well as map pattern recognition and interpretation (C. L. Salter, 1990). Why not instead develop these academic basics in K-12 learners through a curriculum that demonstrated geography’s relevance for college, career and civic life (Stoltman, 1990)? After several projects initiated by the NCGE, AAG, NGS, and GENIP, a joint effort called *Geography for Life (GfL)* became the blueprint for this sort of curricular reform (Bednarz et al. 2003; Bednarz et al. 1994; Downs, 1994). By bringing K-12 and 13-16 geography into greater alignment, *GfL* represented a way to close the gap (Heffron & Downs, 2012). Nonetheless, the gap persists (S. W. Bednarz, 2003, 2016).

Our group received funding from NCRGE to explore an additional strategy to alleviate the gap. Specifically, we focused on the non-classroom personnel who provide information on choices of college to attend, careers to target, courses to take, and majors to declare. In this commentary, we share some of our preliminary insights about where, when, and how *student services professionals*—high school guidance counselors, college admissions representatives, and college general advising staff—recommend pathways to college, courses, and careers to students who express an interest in, and aptitude for, geography.

Developing an understanding of existing student services practices is critical to implementing strategies aimed at escorting a more diverse and inclusive flow of students across the gap and into college-level geography. We sought to address persistent difficulties that students, particularly young women and other underrepresented groups, face in continuing their studies of geography in college.

This project therefore addresses a forecasted mid-21st century shortage of well-trained and highly skilled geographic information scientists in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors, by increasing knowledge about both the barriers and opportunities for students as they transition from high-school geography to college geography. Our group explored the idea that non-classroom-based student services professionals could be potential geography educators as they help students navigate the gap between high school and college geography. What do these “bridge tenders” already know about geography as a subject, about geography careers, and about geography in higher education? What professional recommendations can they make toward enhancing diverse participation in the geography education process, particularly as they advise young women students and students of color? We explored these questions through ongoing conversations with high school guidance counselors, college admissions representatives, and college general advisors in three states: New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.

In the process, we built a research network that incorporates student support professionals. This included five individuals from the realm of admissions, one high school counselor, one professional undergraduate geography advisor, two general college advising supervisors, two high school teachers, one undergraduate student who works admissions and served as a research assistant, and three social scientists (two geographers and a sociologist who study education). We spent 16 hours with high school counselors, 8 hours with AP Human Geography high school teachers, and 70 hours travelling with college admissions counselors. We also have continual contact with general college advisors. We did not consider this to be human subjects research. Rather, we were trying to bridge another gap—between the two worlds of education from which we come: the world of administrative operations and the world of knowledge reproduction. These two worlds needed to learn more about each other to begin collaborating and discovering our potential to do new joint research activities together.

Early on, one idea that the academic social scientists in our network considered was to create and administer a survey to assess student support professionals’ knowledge about geography college and career pathways. While our student support services colleagues thought this idea was interesting, they

really were not sure what the value added would be, except to show that high school counselors, college admissions counselors, and college general academic and career advisors do not know as much about geography as geographers would like them to know. They thought that a more positive collaboration would be to discover how individual geography departments might:

- 1) build lasting bridges to our institutions' admissions, general academic advising, and career services offices to attract more potential geography students to campus and on campus; and,
- 2) establish "pipelines" between academic geography departments and high schools with a high likelihood of interest, application, matriculation, course enrollment, and major declaration.

The great irony in all of this is that through all our contact, the social scientists learned that being an effective school counselor and college admissions counselor requires high levels of geographic and spatial competency. In fact, these jobs may represent career opportunities for geography students. These education professionals do geography every day and don't even know it—admittedly because most of them think of geography in terms of the rote memorization of capes and bays.

The following are short summaries of our findings with different personnel.

School Counselors: School counselors (referred to in some school districts as "guidance counselors") are expert "search" instructors. In some ways, they are also like travel agents. They stay in one place and, using the information at hand, help students narrow down from a possible range of potential destinations what the best "place" for them is going to be for college. Increasingly, the profession entails teaching students how to use powerful online information platforms to generate an array of college options and then showing students how to think critically about the options, including how to read between the lines when it comes to visiting school and department websites and taking tours. They try to get students to understand that this is advertising and that some of it is irrelevant. Because many school counselors are former college admissions counselors themselves and were, therefore, in sales, they try to get students to move past the hype and to gauge authenticity.

School counselors in our network recommended that geography departments take a hard look at our department websites. They urged us to enlist some high school students to help us see our content from the prospective college

student perspective, while also taking a deep dive into the analytics of site use. Driving traffic to our websites is one challenge with which school counselors can help, but capturing interest for more than a few seconds depends on the stories we convey about the richness of the undergraduate student experiences our geography departments offer. High school students want to imagine what their lives might be like with us.

School counselors also recommended that we get our college geography students (their high schools' alumni) into their schools in some fashion, either by visiting, doing Skype sessions, or creating posters that link a particular geography department to the high school through the outcome story of the student/alum we share in common. This leads to what could be a potential finding for this round of research: that if a given geography department is worried about enrollments and declarations, it needs to think about how much capacity it has to do this work and how it is going to measure the return on investment.

School counselors also have insight into geographies of student college choices—and how those choices relate to student gender, family socioeconomic status, family political leanings, race, first-generation college status, and personality. Those geographies may vary from district to district, school to school, but within schools and districts there are definite patterns. Because we are such a small discipline, those variations may make a difference in how and if we engage with a particular school.

School counselors also have an interesting synoptic view of their high school curriculum and know how it fits into their districts' strategic plans. In our discussions about this, it became clear that there is much disagreement about Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment courses from school to school. At least three Chicago area school districts, for example, were deliberating their continued offering of AP Human Geography because of low student and parent satisfaction, declining outcomes, and limited opportunities for using the credits earned at the college of the students' choice. There have also been some complaints that the current exam and textbooks support a left-wing political agenda and that this scares school board members and superintendents.

College admissions counselors: Similar to how we might think of school counselors as travel agents, we can think about college admissions counselors as field geographers, backed up by increasingly robust research teams in the central admissions office on campus that are directing them where to go—based on analytics related to “demonstrated interest,” prior applications received, admissions, and matriculation. Given the shrinking domestic market for prospective college students, colleges and universities use this research to become

laser-focused in their admissions efforts—deciding where to do high school visits, where to do college fairs, how to adjust the pitch to meet the audience, where to schedule yielding and send-off events, etc. This is geography! Some admissions offices are now even employing GIS experts to help, presenting another career opportunity for our students.

One important thing we observed in travelling to schools and working at college fairs alongside them is that not only are college admissions counselors great at wayfinding—to and within schools, but they also have amazing situational awareness. Admissions counselors are place storytellers as they make their elevator pitches about campus and all the amazing things it has to offer. They weave student examples into their stories and try to get prospective students to imagine themselves on the campus, which leads to the punchline invitation to come visit. Thus, admissions counselors try to lessen the psychological distance between the student’s origin and a possible destination through storytelling. Here is where geography departments can help. Admissions counselors search constantly for a wide array of student stories to share: about times when faculty involved students in research, about study abroad experiences, about student organizations and interesting community engagement experiences. Geography departments generate experiences like these in abundance. What stories could an admissions counselor be telling high school audiences about geography students in your department?

Notably, many college admissions counselors start out as humanities and social science majors, who had work-study positions giving campus tours and information sessions. Admissions teams recognize the really talented ones—who ooze authenticity and enthusiasm for the PLACE, and during senior year it is the office that sometimes starts broaching the subject of permanent employment prefaced by the comment, “Wow, we don’t know what we are going to do without you next year.” Some students pursue this opportunity and continue working admissions after graduation because of the benefits that come with it—including health insurance and remitted tuition for grad school. Often, these students pivot academically away from their undergraduate majors and start professional graduate programs in higher education administration. They also sort into two kinds of admissions counselors: regionals and territorials.

“Regionals” are permanently based in a distant metropolitan market with hundreds of high schools, whereas “territorials” are permanently based on campus and make trips to visit high schools across a broader territory. Experienced regionals often eventually hop ship away from their original college institution as a way to advance in their careers. Given that they are far away from campus, their homes and cars are their offices, and their colleagues are high school counselors

and other regionals in the same market—who are employed by competing schools! Territorials, however, have stronger affinities toward their campus and go where central sends them. As they progress through their careers, they seem to be the ones who are likely to become school counselors, usually because they are tired of travel and want to settle down to start and raise families but find higher administration jobs in admissions to be unavailable or do not want to make the disruptive move to another city. They also take advantage of the personal connections they have already made with school administration because of their frequent visits.

The most important thing we learned from college admissions professions is this: Geography's relative rareness when compared with other disciplines ought to be a college or university's selling point. A pitch can start with great student experiences doing research, studying abroad, doing community-based work, having internships and then segue into the idea that the geography department is a great place to do this, because look at what their alums are doing now! But admissions can't tell the stories if they don't know them. Good admissions counselors like meeting with current students from time to time, and even sitting on classes, so they can tell effective stories in high schools. Although they are not supposed to privilege one major over another, if they can build one great geography student story into their pitch (or geography can get a captioned photograph in the main brochure or viewbook distributed in high schools), it is a win for our discipline.

Advising and Career Services: The experts tell us that the best way to work with advising and career services is for departments to create a clear one-page statement of the geography major's value propositions and another one-page statement telling career outcome stories. For advising, departments should also produce a list of courses on offer for the next registration cycle that really hypes the learning outcomes in language that will be compelling to first-year and second-year students. After developing these materials, representatives from the geography department can schedule a meeting with the general advising team (they usually have weekly professional development meetings), make a 5-minute pitch, and then open it up for 5 minutes of questions. This part of our research was the least formed because in the middle of it, the general and career advising professionals with whom we had been partnering left the university. The new team has been busy trying to get up and running. However, members of our research network have extensive professional experience in this area, having served as undergraduate directors and as a professional undergraduate advisor.

We believe that the biggest struggle in working with general academic advising teams has been departments learning how to: 1) push back, politely,

against misperceptions about geography and career outcomes and 2) get general advising teams to give good advice regarding geography. Students from some colleges and universities have told us informally that general advisors have steered them away from certain majors/minors because “you can’t get a job in that.” We do not know how widespread that experience is for geography, but we want to correct the misperception that geography is irrelevant because now we have Google. We must do this kind of geography education work constantly because the admissions and advising teams (not to mention leadership teams within our own geography departments) are always changing.

Sustainability and Return on Investment

Overall, we have come to realize that what we have actually been studying in this project is not so much about student persistence moving across the gap as it is about addressing geography’s institutional sustainability in higher education as a field of study. What challenges are geography departments facing in a world where higher education institutions are measuring departments according to course enrollments, major declarations, and job placements? And, while we initially balked at discussions about ANY of this when some of us were rank-and-file faculty members, once we moved into chairs positions and became responsible for strategic planning and program review activities, we began to have to address sustainability and sell it as a topic of conversation to the faculty. From our discussions with school counselors and college admissions counselors and hearing about their concerns for storytelling, search, and department imageability, we are starting to wonder: Is changing the name of a department from geography to something else wise? Is changing the name enough?

Like it or not, we have to be practical. Geography is misunderstood as a discipline. We, the academic discipline, have spent considerable time and money getting geography back into K-12 education in more meaningful ways, while trying to convince policymakers and our colleagues that we do relevant and important work. We actually think that we need to do more of this advertising and lobbying work but now focus on young people. Helping them develop the competencies, knowledge, and skills to be geographically aware citizens is no longer enough. We must start talking more about WHY having geography awareness is going to open up opportunities for them. If we can convince them that sticking with geography can lead to edifying careers that make a difference and through which they can support themselves financially, then maybe they will pay more attention in high school, do better on the NAEP and AP exams, enroll at higher levels in college, etc. At the very least, if we are able to take care of this college, career, and citizenship advertising challenge with young people, maybe when they are voters and decision makers and employers as adults, we will not be fighting the capes and bays problem anymore.

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