



# Introduction: Reflections on Career Development in Academic Geography

**Murray D. Rice\***

*Department of Geography, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203, USA*

*\*Corresponding author: Phone: (940) 565-3861; Email: murray.rice@unt.edu*

One of my family's biggest concerns in my many years of university education was whether I would eventually end up with a real, honest-to-goodness job. I recall my grandmother commenting on how I appeared to be on track for perpetual poverty, and wondering how a next generation of our family would even be possible given my lack of a career. Well, with patience, hard work, and a dose of good fortune, eventually I graduated with my doctorate in geography, spent a few years building a geographic consulting business while teaching part-time, and finally landed a tenure-track faculty position that was the perfect fit for my education and interests. Things have turned out pretty well for me so far in academia, but memories of my graduate school and early career years continue to linger.

It occurs to me that the issues and challenges I have faced in my career are by no means unique. While I doubt that more than a handful would care to follow my precise career path, many have traversed geography graduate programs and engaged in the process of seeking, finding, and developing an elusive tenure-track faculty opportunity. Of course, not all will complete this progression, with many leaving for other interesting and fulfilling careers at any of a variety of points along the way. But some stay and flourish in this unique academic sub-culture of ours. The group of people who remain and succeed on the tenure track is without doubt one that is characterized by the patience, hard work, and good fortune I have cited above. But it also strikes me

that there is much more to it than those three fairly generic factors, and that geography and geographers would benefit if a broad cross-section of faculty could reflect on and gather their career development thoughts for wider distribution. What practices, priorities, and insights are associated with successful career development in academic geography?

Given this motivation, a group of geography faculty at all stages of the career advancement cycle gathered at the SWAAG 2013 annual meeting in Nacogdoches to participate in a panel session organized around the topic of career development in our discipline. Our session explored the issues, challenges, and considerations linked with the series of transitions and milestones that characterize many academic careers:

1. graduate student to assistant professor (with perhaps some post-doctoral experience along the way)
2. assistant professor to associate professor (often linked with a tenure decision)
3. associate professor to full professor

We arranged the session to allow for much flexibility in the direction and content of the discussion. This emphasis followed from the subject matter: with an issue as complex as career development and a field as diverse as geography, we felt it was important that our discussion be allowed to organically develop and reflect the broad range of insights and concerns of the session panelists and audience members.

Nonetheless, we did not want our panel

discussion to be aimless. Thus, we set out a set of core questions that at minimum every panelist reflected upon in preparation for the session. Our discussion certainly went beyond these questions, but it was helpful to outline a set of central issues to help us prepare for the session. Our five core topics and guiding questions included:

1. Briefly summarize your *educational and professional background*. How did you arrive at university teaching as a career, and how would you describe the career stage you are at right now?
2. What did you know about the *requirements and responsibilities* of an academic career when you started as a beginning faculty member? Has anything surprised you about being a faculty member as your career has developed?
3. What have been the *biggest challenges* you have faced? What have been the most outstanding highlights you have experienced in being a faculty member?
4. Briefly, what are the basic *tenure requirements* at your institution? How are these requirements communicated to faculty? Are there aspects of these requirements and their communication that you either appreciate or would like to change?
5. What *advice* would you give to students and faculty who are making their way through the education and career stages you have already traversed?

As the session actually played out, our discussion included some focus on a selection of these five questions (especially questions 1 and 5), as well as much open, free-form dialogue that went beyond these particular topics. Our broad consensus was that the panel discussion was valuable, and several people present expressed the regret that we did not record the session in a more permanent manner for future and broader reference.

In one post-session chat, Bill Doolittle from UT-Austin provided the helpful suggestion that we organize a collection of personal reflections by session participants in *The Southwestern Geographer* around the session discussion. I'm grateful to Bill for this simple but useful idea. It is from Bill's suggestion, and the session described above, that this special collection of essays has emerged.

In the pages comprising this essay collection, our session panelists and prominent audience participants provide their personal reflections, ideas, and advice. I've suggested that our contributors might use the original five questions as a starting-point for

their commentary. However, I have also invited the contributors to provide reflections on any issue related to graduate education and career development in geography that they see as contributing to our broader discussion.

One last observation: it is important to note that our essay contributors come from across the career spectrum. At the time of this writing, our authors range from an assistant professor actively engaged in the late stages of their pre-tenure period (Buenemann), through associate professors in the midst of career development, contribution and advancement (Greiner, Hagelman, and Purcell), on to full professors who provide insights from the vantage of decades of academic involvement and experience in a variety of departmental, university, and disciplinary leadership positions, including the critical department chair's vantage point (Bednarz, Colten, Doolittle, and Giordano).<sup>1</sup> This breadth of perspective is central to understanding and taking best advantage of the views provided in this essay collection. Additionally, it is important to note that each contribution has its own style and priorities: some focus on assembling an overall set of suggestions applicable to faculty and/or graduate students, while others provide more of a mix of personal anecdotes together with general wisdom for career development. Out of this variety of style and approach, I certainly expect that one or two of the essays in this collection will speak especially directly to each individual reader. However, I would encourage everyone to take the time to carefully review each contribution as an insightful set of perspectives relating to the progress of careers in geography. Each of our contributors provides a unique take on career development that faculty and graduate students alike would benefit from understanding.

My sincere thanks go out to everyone who contributed to this essay collection. Thank you to all of our essayists for your vibrant and helpful contributions to our panel session discussion, and even more so for what we now record for ongoing reference. While more needs to be said about career development in academic geography, the efforts here advance the conversation. I hope that all of our readers will find the career development essays included here to be as stimulating as the panel discussion that began this entire project.

---

<sup>1</sup>My only regret in this essay collection is that we did not achieve a better contributor balance among the academic ranks. Although senior faculty members have a wealth of insight to share, more input from people writing from the assistant professor perspective in particular would have enriched the conversation.