



The Best Fit: Passion for a Profession

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At the SWAAG meetings in Nacogdoches in October 2013, I was invited as a full professor to reflect on my career and offer remarks in general on career development. As the eldest of the panelists, I had the most to consider. It was a welcome opportunity to consider a number of things about careers and development. I title this essay, “The Best Fit” because it captures what I have experienced as a geographer and educator—it has been the best fit for me.

I think I have always had the mindset of a geographer. As a child my family moved fairly frequently. My father was a chemical engineer with Mobil Oil and I grew up thinking Mobil meant mobile. Each place we lived, both in the United States and overseas, I was always very curious about why this place was the way it was and how it came to be that way. Our family vacations were often focused on my father’s curiosity about history—and geography. So we frequently tramped Civil War battle fields looking at the locations of these great conflagrations. Later, when we lived in the Philippines this meant going to Corregidor in Manila Bay and a trip to Thailand to see where they built the bridge over the river Kwai. Site and situation, although not named, became concepts I understood. It was only in high school in New Zealand that I discovered geography was the discipline that best answered the questions about which I was innately interested. I selected a college with a geography department, Mount Holyoke College, and had three wonderful mentors there, Minnie Lemaire, Judith Meyer, and Peter Enggass.

My passion was geography, but what I intended to do with it was to work in the field of economic development. I wanted to prepare myself to return to Southeast Asia or other parts of the world to help people in need. Either that, or join the CIA. But I opted for graduate school at the University of Chicago to work with Norton Ginsburg, a leading expert in economic development and Asia. Alas, or perhaps fortunately, Ginsburg opted for an extra year away from Chicago to complete a book at the Center for Democratic Studies. I had to quickly choose a different course to follow. Luckily, I had a long conversation with William D. Pattison, then assistant department head. He suggested that with my interests and enthusiasm for geography I would make a wonderful teacher. This was something I had never considered. I had several role models in my family. My great aunt and uncle taught at Colombia University, my cousin at the University of Massachusetts, and my grandmother had prepared to be a teacher. But me? Yes, indeed, because I came to realize, I did feel that geography could really help individuals to better understand the world in which they live and to make it a better place.

I completed a Masters of Arts in Teaching at Chicago and taught in Evanston, Illinois, for four years before moving to Texas with my husband and best friend, Robert, also a geographer, who took a job at Texas A&M University. I taught a range of high school courses, including Government and U.S. History, before landing my ideal position,

teaching World Geography in College Station. But something was nagging me. While I loved teaching and was fairly successful, I became increasingly curious about the process of learning geography. Why did some students have an innate interest in the subject as I had had and why did others struggle with the subject and school in general. I met James Kracht, a geography educator at Texas A&M, who suggested I pursue a PhD. This I did, starting in 1985, fully intending to stay in the classroom. However, during my year of residency at TAMU, I began teaching *Introduction to Human Geography* for the department. Coincidentally, the principal who had granted me a leave of absence, left for a new position. When time came to return to teaching, I was scheduled to be a floating teacher with a limited number of geography classes. I decided to stay in higher education. And with a number of excellent mentors, including Robert, I have thrived, moving into a tenure track position at A&M, tenure and then promotion to full professor. I knew about the requirements and responsibilities of an academic career from seeing Robert track ahead. And I was guided not only by him and other colleagues in the department but by colleagues in geography across the country, connections I had made through my work in geography education beginning in the mid-1980s with the National Geographic Society and the National Council for Geographic Education.

Although now as an associate dean I am somewhat removed from geography and geography education, I still have many chances every day to share my enthusiasm for the discipline, to tout the power of its perspectives to make a difference in our world. As a professor, however, I think the biggest challenge has been to find the same degree of care and concern for students that I shared with my fellow educators when I was teaching high school. There, we had a shared sense of vision and purpose that I do not find in higher education, at least in my department. Being a university professor is a fairly lonely profession. There is an independence to it; you are free to shape your research the way you wish. At the same time, we are all driven by the fashions of our discipline to obtain the right grants, to write about topics other people care about (citations, citations, citations), and to be seen as a leader.

This is especially true for women faculty; we are often called upon to be role models and to provide service (which I prefer to characterize as academic leadership) to show “representation” and diversity. This can sap our energy and lead to a lack of focus. It can also result in what I perceive as a very worrisome

trend—women faculty “stuck” in the associate professor rank but with significant administrative responsibilities. It is hard to say no, but adhering to a clear plan for success and achievement is key.

I think finding the best fit of things that interest you and are fundable and judged to be valuable is the goal. Not all of us can succeed, yet we must carry on. I have been lucky in that respect. I became interested in the topic of teaching and learning with geospatial technologies early. I was able to work with an extremely high powered and brilliant group of scholars on the National Research Council study that led to the publication *Learning to Think Spatially*. At the same time, I was working with my former teaching colleagues to help them use GIS and remote sensing to teach geography. I saw they simply did not have the time to invest in learning the new technologies let alone the ways to teach with them. With a very clear plan of how to assist them I wrote a proposal for a GK-12 grant to NSF that was funded. For five years I was able to support graduate students here at Texas A&M to work with teachers in College Station and elsewhere to learn to teach geography and science with geospatial technologies. This was serendipity and a highlight of my career.

To conclude, I have just a few lessons learned to share:

- Seek and listen to mentors. I have had the very great fortune to meet a number of people, men and women, who cared about me, had confidence in my abilities, and who provided excellent advice. I did not always listen, but it always helped me make reasoned decisions.
- Find the nexus of what interests you, what will make a difference, and what will allow you to achieve academic success. This may require some compromise but will also provide you with the inspiration and motivation to put in the hard work that is required.
- Be prepared to be flexible. But have a clear plan for where you want to be and what you want to do.
- Create your own community at a range of scales, local, regional, national and international. One of the joys of my career has been connecting with geographers from around the world: the UK, South Africa, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, Singapore, Korea, Japan, Australia. At the

same time I have loved getting to know the nooks and crannies of the Southwest. My fellow AP Human Geographers have been an amazing national group of colleagues. Make an effort to form supportive groups.

I will stop. The opportunity to reflect on a career is welcome and for this gift I wish to thank Murray Rice and my fellow contributors.