



# Navigating the Landscape of Academic Geography

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My journey through the landscape of academic geography has been non-linear and marked by surprises, leading me ultimately to pursue my passion for geography in one of my favorite places in the world—the U.S. Southwest. The journey began on the outskirts of a small town in northwestern Germany, where I was born into a family that, though non-academic until my generation, valued education, hard work, and travel. My parents thought it would be wonderful if I earned a university degree to get a job as a high school teacher, a job that in their minds offered good pay, excellent security, and ideal hours to accommodate being a good mother and wife. I eventually did go to the university but to study ecotourism geography. Not long into the program, after realizing that I didn't have to study tourism to travel as a geographer, I shifted my emphasis to physical geography, which I liked much better. Shortly after that, I participated in a geography excursion through the U.S. Southwest. The course was offered by a professor from the University of Oklahoma who quickly suggested that I complete a student exchange year at his university to learn more about geographic information science and technology. I jumped at the opportunity and told my folks in Germany not to be sad; after all, I'd only be gone for one year. Well, that was fifteen years ago. Since then, I spent five years as a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma, two as an instructor at James Madison University, one as an adjunct lecturer at the University of Arizona, and finally nearly six as a tenure-track assistant professor at New Mexico State University.

The surprises along this journey are too numerous to list here, but a few deserve mention. The ones I found the most rewarding and satisfying include consulting for groups like the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification; collaborating with international and interdisciplinary research teams to better understand complex human-environment systems and issues of sustainable land management; seeing my students succeed; improving search and rescue operations in New Mexico through outreach; and becoming part of a strong collegial network. Other surprises were less positive and presented me with serious challenges. Just like the positive surprises, however, and perhaps more so, they afforded me with excellent opportunities for personal and professional growth. Some of what I've learned from the twists and turns in the academic road I've traveled is reflected in my recommendations below. The suggestions are in no particular order and aimed primarily at graduate students and junior faculty. The recommendations were much easier written than followed.

- Prepare yourself for navigating the landscape of academic geography like you might for navigating “real” landscapes (Table 1). Specify your vision, goals, and objectives. Identify your values, strengths, and weaknesses. Clarify the knowledge, skills, behaviors, activities, resources, and supports needed to achieve your desired objectives, goals, and vision. Once you have compiled all this information, mold it into

**Table 1.** Analogy between navigating the landscape of academic geography and navigating real landscapes.

Requirements	Landscape of Academic Geography (Examples)	Real Landscape (Examples)
Vision	International recognition for excellence in research and teaching on a specific topic	Intimate knowledge of a certain environment
Goals	Promotion and tenure	Hiking destination
Objectives	Publish two papers per year	Hike five miles per day
Values	Balance between personal and professional life	Trade-offs between hiking distance and scenic beauty
Strengths	Collaborative research	Backpacking
Weaknesses	Qualitative research	Rock climbing
Knowledge	Promotion and tenure requirements	Topography
Skills	Teaching	Map and compass use
Behaviors	Demonstrate integrity	Tread carefully
Activities	Participation in workshops	Physical exercise
Resources	Grants	Hiking gear
Supports	Mentors	Trainers
Action plan, persistence, patience, flexibility, creativity, serendipity, ...		

an action plan. Follow this plan, or path, to reach your intended destination, but be ready to adapt and change as unexpected ups, downs, roundabouts, hurdles, and opportunities happen along the way. That is, be persistent, patient, flexible, creative, and hope for some serendipity.

- Manage your time wisely. This includes prioritizing tasks according to their importance and urgency and working in regular manageable blocks of time separated by frequent short breaks. Consider using one of many available apps aimed at implementing the Pomodoro Technique for effective time management.
- Find mentors for your different needs (e.g., professional development, substantive feedback, and access to opportunities; see the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity “Mentoring Map” for more information) within your department, in other departments at your university, and outside your university. Listen to these mentors. Be proactive and seek them out early; don’t wait until difficulties arise.
- Develop positive collegial relationships and networks (e.g., through collaborative research efforts and professional service) to support research, teaching, and learning in geography and to open doors for personal growth, professional development, and career advancement. Build networks at local to global scales, across disciplinary boundaries, and in all job sectors, including academia and the private and public sectors. With strong networks in place, everybody can benefit, including you, your students, and your colleagues.
- Work hard to meet or exceed the promotion and tenure requirements of your institution and “don’t be a schmuck”. If possible, help improve the promotion and tenure guidelines that will be used to evaluate your performance (e.g., ensure they reflect what is valued by your peers such as single- vs. multi-authored publications). Keep track of all of your research, teaching, service, and outreach accomplishments at all times to facilitate quick and easy report compilation for both annual performance and promotion and tenure reviews.

- Research, teaching, advising, and mentoring are all areas in which we can constantly learn new things. When sensible, invest some time in developing your knowledge and skills in these areas by attending workshops, seminars, and conferences. Always be a student.
- Develop your own research program so that others don't see you as someone else's collaborator only. Create your research niche in an area that you love and that is fundable. At the same time, if a promising opportunity for collaboration arises, consider taking advantage of it for reasons mentioned elsewhere in this essay.
- Strive to be a well-rounded geographer that is capable of appreciating all aspects of the discipline of geography. Attend colloquia on a diversity of topics; talk shop with all of your peers. This will go a long way towards building collegiality. It will also give you new ideas for research and teaching and make you a stronger partner in the kinds of interdisciplinary efforts that allow geographers to make the perhaps most significant research contributions.
- Create a research and writing group for your graduate students and meet with the group regularly, if you don't already have a well-funded lab in which students work collaboratively on your research projects. The group can help generate a sense of community among students with at times very different research projects and provides an incentive for students to stay engaged in the research and writing process. At the same time, it allows you to provide regular and timely feedback to your students and to efficiently track their progress.
- Say yes and no strategically, because for everything you say yes to, you have to say no to something else. Speak up for yourself when necessary; others may want the best for you, but only you know how much teaching, service, and outreach you are actually doing
- Focus on the positive and constructive aspects of the job. Pick your battles carefully and fight only for what really matters. Don't let bad politics, policies, or people irritate you and waste your time.
- Take good care of yourself. Eat well, exercise regularly, and sleep enough to ensure your productivity at work, well-being, and health. Take your profession seriously, but not yourself, and surround yourself with people who do the same. Balance and blend your personal and professional life as needed to achieve success and happiness.
- If you are an international student or faculty member, carefully keep track of all immigration-related documents and activities, save money to pay for filing fees and lawyers, inform yourself about what needs to be done and when, and do it as soon as possible; others may not have any experience with immigration issues.
- If you are a graduate student, take the above to heart and act as if being a student is your job. Try to focus on research but also gain some experience in teaching. Present your work at meetings and publish. Do internships. Network. Be part of a learning community: support your peers and allow yourself to be supported by them; avoid operating in a vacuum. Finish your thesis or dissertation before taking a full-time job.
- Don't expect things to get easier overall; new challenges will probably materialize as soon as you've addressed old ones. Have fun in the now.