



Academic Transitions: The Perspective of a First-year Chair

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I became an academic after several years of working as a cartographer and GIS professional in the private and public sector in Italy, first in the editorial office of a publishing company and then as a consultant in the design and implementation of urban GIS applications. During that time (late-1980s to mid-1990s) I also worked on a variety of international projects, culminating in the development of draft standards for the exchange of geographic information. I started my Ph.D. at Syracuse at 33, later than most of my peers. After completing the program, I looked for academic positions in the U.S., applying more based on criteria of geographic desirability than on the academic reputation of the department I was seeking to join. In retrospect, this was not the right strategy to follow, for reasons that will become apparent in the next paragraph. I applied to one university in Europe—and never heard back—while also exploring opportunities for work in international organizations, my true passion at that stage of my life. That door, too, remained closed, possibly because international organizations in the mid-90s had little use for cartographers and GIS experts, or possibly because I was lacking some of the skills and knowledge needed for that type of career: most likely, it was a combination of these two reasons.

My first tenure-track job started in the fall semester right after Ph.D. graduation in an undergraduate department of earth and geographic sciences in an urban university. The day before my job officially started, I was asked to attend a meeting between my department of about seven

faculty members and a much larger department in the college. The meeting was held at a hotel and run by a mediator hired by the university. The topic was the merging of the two departments, or rather the taking by the larger department of our faculty lines, plus our GIS program. The dean and the upper administration were fully onboard with the plan. What I remember most vividly of that day was the initial round of presentations, in which each participant briefly stated his or her teaching and research interests. After my short statement, a colleague from the larger department told me in front of everybody that I would never get tenure in the merged unit if “that’s what you want to do.” Predictably, the next four years were a struggle for professional survival, not only for me but for our department and for geography, in a university that for the most part did not value me, my department, and our field. I stayed in the position three years too long, on account of my geography colleagues, who were nice, decent people and true friends and mentors; they not only valued and respected each other, but deeply believed in the mission of the university and cared for its students, a mix of non-traditional first-timers and new or recent arrivals to the U.S. Also a reason to stay, I had applied for a green card and dared not to seek other positions during the time it took to get it. I left in 2003 together with most of my colleagues: the recent hires moved on to new positions, the senior colleagues retired. Only one of us joined the new department, which finally succeeded in securing our lines and the coveted GIS program.

What I learned from my first job is how universities work, administratively and politically, from the perspective of an untenured assistant professor. I learned that without the strong support of the upper administration, starting with the Dean, it is difficult to sustain and grow an healthy department; I also learned the importance of being in the right college (we were not); and I learned that not having a competent and loyal staff affects not only the day-to-day operations of the unit, but also and more insidiously the morale of faculty and students. Hard to swallow for a passionate practitioner of the field, it became very clear to me very quickly that universities with relatively scarce financial resources tend not to value geography, and would rather support—perhaps rightly so—the “hard” sciences, or computer and information technology programs, that in aggregate tend to lead to higher paying jobs for their graduates. But the most important lesson I learned in those four years is that departments are communities that interact vertically and horizontally with other departments in the university and with the upper administration. Such relationships can be mutually beneficial or can result in conflict, as was the case in my first job. Hierarchical relations exist within departments as well, but for the most part relationships between faculty members are—at least after tenure—of the horizontal type.

One of the Merriam-Webster’s definitions of community is “a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.” This is just one of several definitions of community given in that particular dictionary, but one that is especially fit to describe academic units such as academic departments. As a participant to the session of the SWAAG 2013 Meeting that occasioned this special issue of the *Southwestern Geographer*, I was asked to illustrate the perspective of the department Chair on the transitions and milestones that characterize academic careers. I should say that because at the time I was in my first semester in the position and only in my second year as Full Professor, my perspective was very limited. There are many transitions in academia—from graduate student, to temporary post-doc or adjunct, to permanent lecturer, to tenure-track, Associate, Full, and, for those who feel inclined to do it, Chair—each with its own challenges. With some of these transitions I am familiar with, having gone through them myself; of others, I have little or no first-hand knowledge. For example, I never was a post-doc and we do not have such positions in my department at the present time, so I do not feel

qualified to comment on the transition from graduate student to post-doc. For this reason, and for brevity, in the rest of this essay I will concentrate on transitions that might lead to permanent positions or to promotion, and especially on what I gather—perhaps incorrectly—is the aspiration of most freshly-minted geography Ph.D.s in the SWAAG region: a tenure-track job. From this perspective of permanency, the idea of department as community, while certainly not an original concept, is especially useful.

I will start by stressing the importance of the relationship between the community of faculty, staff, and students in a department of Geography and the much larger community in which they live. The concept of place as a center of “felt value,” as Yi-Fu Tuan put it almost thirty years ago, serves as a reminder that being involved and vested in the community we have chosen to become a part of is a duty and privilege, especially as geographers. Most of us give money or time (or both) to philanthropic causes of our liking, but what I am referring to here is the obligation we should feel for sharing our talents and abilities with the rest of the community we live in. For example, faculty in our department—and no doubt many others—reach out to high schools and colleges, give talks to local interest groups and organizations, and are politically active at the local level. Some in our faculty teach courses in which students work on “real world” projects for local governments and non-profit organizations, thus gaining work experience while providing services to worthy causes in a win-win situation for all those involved, and for geography itself. All of this, of course, takes time, and for this reason I would not necessarily recommend that a new tenure-track faculty member engage extensively in community service. But it is a rewarding experience for all individuals involved, inside and outside the university. Perhaps because of the times, place, and political conditions in which I spent my most formative years (Italy in the late 1970s and 1980s), I very strongly believe academics should give back to their community by actively participating in the life of the place where they live. One of the fondest memories of my first job in academia was the work I did with a community health center on a project mapping hazardous areas in an unprivileged neighborhood. Although in the end it did not work out as we had all hoped, we (faculty, students, and community organizers) all learned from the experience.

Departments are centers of felt value, too. A key moment in the life of the department community

is the arrival of a new member, with his or her new perspectives and ideas. The learning curve for a new tenure-track faculty member is especially steep during the first year of his or her career. There are the obvious challenges that involve juggling the responsibilities of a faculty member, including teaching, research, service, knowing where things are, learning how the university works, etc. And then there are the really tricky issues, which in the end all relate to how to carve your own place in the new community. These include meeting and building relationships with new colleagues inside and outside the department, learning to navigate the department's and the university's political landscapes, knowing when to hold the line on a strongly held conviction and when to let go. One question new colleagues often ask is how often and how forcefully they should express their opinion at faculty meetings. My advice would be to freely and actively participate in the life of the department and to contribute to the shaping of its future with enthusiasm, but to do so respectfully of those who have been part of the community for a longer period of time, for they have the historical perspective and (in many cases) the wisdom newcomers may lack. I myself never followed the advice I was given as a graduate student—and later occasionally also as tenure-track faculty member—to avoid expressing my opinions publicly on matters I felt strongly about. Departments go through much trouble when they hire new members: the process is long and costs a great deal of time and money, and one of the last things I think a Chair would want is a colleague who does not participate in the life of the department and does not interact with its members. To paraphrase a well-known quote, it takes a department to raise a successful, productive, and happy colleague. In this respect, mentoring is essential and should not be delegated to a single individual, but it should be the responsibility of all (including the staff, by the way). In our department, we formally assign all new colleagues to a mentor of their choosing, but I believe that additional advice should be sought from others, both in the department and outside of it, horizontally as well as vertically, and also outside of the university.

Another issue of concern for new tenure-track assistant professors, perhaps the most important, is tenure. In our department, we give as clear guidelines as we can on the tenure process right at the time of the interview, laying down what is expected of new hires in terms of teaching, research and service. Denying tenure or not renewing a contract along the way is disruptive to the life of the colleague on the receiving

end, it lowers morale in the department, and is a traumatic experience for all involved. As such, I believe departments should go to great lengths to avoid finding itself in the position of denying tenure to a faculty member. Parting with a colleague in such circumstances is most often a failure on the part of the department, which was either unable to create the right conditions for success, or hired the wrong person for the job. Regardless of the circumstances, a faculty member should be formally evaluated every year and given clear and unequivocal feedback, so that he or she is fully aware of the progress made and knows which path needs to be taken to achieve tenure and promotion. This is what we do in my department, and it is the right thing to do. A story I have heard many times concerns the candidate who was told by the Dean (or the Chair, or the Search Committee) during a job interview: “we do not set tenure requirements at our university; if we did, everybody would get it.” I am not sure this conversation ever actually occurred, but if you happen to be on the receiving end of it, do yourself a favor and run away as fast as possible. You can have a growing, productive, and successful department while being decent, good, and respectful towards each other. For every successful dysfunctional department there are many more, or at least I hope so, that are functional communities of people working together to improve the professional and personal lives of their members.

In many geography departments in the U.S., the Chair serves a fixed number of years and faculty members are rotated into the position. This is not the case at Texas State, where Chairs are selected by the administration, voted in by the faculty, and usually serve long terms. (My department, for example, only had three Chairs in the years 1977-2013.) Whatever the model, when it comes to decision making departments operate following the principle of shared governance, a *modus operandi* virtually unheard of in the private sector, at least in the U.S. To conclude this brief essay, I will comment on the post-tenure stage of the career of a faculty member using as starting point the concept of shared governance. As the years go by, faculty members tend to concentrate their energies on specific aspects of the academic experience according to their talents and inclinations. Some devote most of their time and passion to teaching, others to research; some excel at ensuring external funding, others concentrate on service to the profession, the university, or the department. (Among the most rewarding aspects of our profession is the fact that we do have choices and that we rarely, if ever, get bored.) In a very large

department like ours, with a permanent staff and faculty of around forty at different stages of their careers, sharing governance can be extremely challenging. The key, I think, is to build an environment in which each faculty member feels valued, appreciated, and vested in the future of the department as well as its current circumstances and conditions. I confess to not being sure of how to achieve the goal of full participation in shared governance, as this is an extremely challenging—and not fully defined, I must add—proposition that requires constant balance, patience, and an ability to see things from multiple perspectives. Two things that I tried to facilitate shared governance are individual extended meetings and retreats. During my first semester as Chair, I conducted individual one-hour

meetings with all faculty and staff members as well as group meetings for certain categories of colleagues (e.g., tenure-track faculty). I plan to have such meetings at least once a year every year during my tenure as Chair. It is my hope that this, and my open door policy, contribute to fostering collaboration, understanding, and trust, so that everybody feels like they have a voice in shaping the present and the future of the department. I am also a big believer in holding faculty retreats at least once a year. Retreats, I believe, are fundamental moments of shared governance. As such, they provide all faculty members who choose to participate in them a chance to weigh in on issues of relevance to the department community in a format and venue less formal and more relaxed than a faculty meeting.