

Academic and Vocational Aspects of Geographical Training

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Most college students today are very much concerned about their future job opportunities. Frequent inquiries of this nature, by potential geography majors, have stimulated the preparation of this paper. Students seeking guidance ask simple questions, but the answers are sometimes elusive and deserve much deliberation and thought.

For what is a geography major trained? How can he earn a living after graduation? Should a student major in geography if he is more interested in that discipline than any other? Should a student change his major to geography if he makes fair grades in geography courses but fails in the courses of his previously chosen field? These are the questions—asked by college students almost every day. What are the answers?

A questionnaire designed to help answer these questions was recently sent to fifty-three Oklahoma A. and M. College graduates by the local geography club. Each of the former students receiving the questionnaire had majored in geography while in college. The specific aims of the project were to determine the degree of success these former students had experienced in finding employment in their chosen field, and to collect information on job opportunities that might prove valuable to current and future geography majors.

Twenty-four of the questionnaires were returned, representing 45.3 per cent of the total. Eleven of those replying hold the Master of Science degree and the other thirteen hold bachelor degrees. Nine are engaged in teaching, 10 in government work, either in the armed forces or as civilians, and 5 are employed by private industry. Of the 9 teachers, 8 hold masters degrees and the 9th has completed all requirements for the masters degree except his thesis. Seven of the 9 in government service hold only the bachelors degree. This group is almost equally divided between civilian and military service. Five of the students reported they were employed by industry. Only one of this group holds the masters degree.

An analysis shows that 29 per cent of these people, all of which hold the masters degree, are actually employed as geographers or teachers of geography. Less than one-third of the masters students hold jobs that are not specifically of a geographical nature.

What consideration was given to the geographical training of these students as a basis for their employment? Sixteen per cent of those reporting thought it was a primary consideration, 42 per cent considered it secondary and 42 per cent believed it was given no consideration. Of the latter group, more than half were men in the military services.

Among the masters students, 73 per cent believe that geography was the best possible training they could have received for their present jobs, while only 15 per cent of the bachelor students believe this to be true.

Sixty-three per cent of these former students believe there are other openings in their present occupations for personnel trained in geography. Those of this opinion are primarily engaged in teaching or in government work.

From the results of this questionnaire, it seems evident that students holding only a bachelors degree in geography should not consider themselves professional geographers. They should not expect to be immediately employed in positions requiring specific geographical training. On the

other hand, there has been no instance reported to this writer, either by questionnaire or by other means, of an applicant's having been refused employment because of his geographical training. It seems as satisfactory as any of the liberal arts, and considerably better than some, for qualifying a student for a successful career in any one of numerous occupations.

A distinct change is noted immediately upon the acquisition of a masters degree in geography. The student approaches the professional level of training and his chances of employment on the basis of his geographical training are improved from 15 per cent to 73 per cent.

The two principal media of employment for geographers have been in the teaching and government fields. Private industry has not yet recognized a need for geographers on its payrolls. Although many geographers have worked for industry during recent years, they are usually assigned a title far removed from the word "geography" or any of its derivations.

Our science, as a professional discipline, is quite new in the United States. Until recently, the demands for teachers and government workers have consumed the supply of trained personnel. We now should concentrate on industry and prove our worth as skilled planners and managers if geography is to maintain a healthy and growing position in the college curriculum. High-quality students should be sought and trained, not to be clerks or bookkeepers or drill-press operators, but to fill jobs leading toward executive positions where plans are drawn and decisions are made. More and more, industry is indicating a desire for that type of college graduate to fill its junior executive positions.

Geography-trained personnel are slowly but surely invading this field. What is needed now is more and better geography students. A tabulation of 119 graduates from the Department of Geography of Oklahoma A. and M. College, since that departmental organization six years ago, indicates this to be true. Of this group, 90 hold the bachelors degree and 29 have been granted the master's degree.

Forty-five percent of the master's degree students have found jobs in the teaching field, over half of which have been on the college level. Several of those in college teaching have completed some graduate work above the masters degree and two of them have received the Ph. D. degree. The teaching fields in highschool and in the grades have been neglected. This is especially true in the latter case where more individual hours of geography instruction are required than in all of the highschools and colleges combined.

Those in the government service are equally divided between the armed forces and the various civilian bureaus and departments. Several of the former group have chosen military life as a career and are finding that geographical training especially qualifies them for some of the more desirable fields of specialty. Of the latter, positions have been found in the Weather Bureau, Hydrographic Office, State Department, Post Office and Intelligence Service.

About one-fourth of the geography majors from Oklahoma A. and M. College have been employed by industry. A few have established private enterprises or have entered a family business with their fathers or other relatives. Eighty-five per cent of this group, however, have been employed by companies and corporations in many different capacities. Their duties range from personnel director to draftsman and from semi-skilled manual labor to foreman. Oil companies have been the greatest source of employment with farm machinery manufacturers and aircraft factories showing good possibilities.

In summary, the largest single source of employment for geography majors seems to be in the service of the government. Civil service ap-

pointments have been relatively easy to obtain and promotions have been frequent. Industry is the next most important source of employment. Students obtain these positions and advance with the companies according to their personality, educational attainment, ability and willingness to work rather than their specific geographical training. Finally, teaching is an important source of employment. This field has been noticeably neglected except on the college level. The greatest opportunities seem to lie in the elementary and secondary fields.

This diversity of occupational employment, found by geography graduates from Oklahoma A. and M. College, emphasizes the academic rather than vocational aspects of the discipline. Job possibilities are numerous but are usually based on academic accomplishment rather than vocational specialty. Geographical training becomes professional in character only when the student specializes beyond the baccalaureate degree.
