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Introduction: Towards a Scholarship of Academic Practice

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The International Network for Learning and Teaching Geography in Higher Education (INLT) convened nearly 60 geographers and postgraduate students from more than 12 countries for a workshop in Washington, DC on 12–13 April 2010. This JGHE Symposium features a collection of papers stemming from the workshop, which was held immediately preceding the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

Participants in the workshop gathered to discuss and debate topics related to the theme of “Changing Geography in Higher Education: Towards a Scholarship of Academic Practice”. While previous INLT workshops focused primarily on the issues related to classroom pedagogy and learning theory (Healey *et al.*, 2010), the 2010 workshop explored topics at the heart of ensuring geography’s long-term vitality in higher education systems worldwide. Although a continued focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning will remain an essential strategy in this endeavor, the constitution of geography in higher education can also be secured by giving scholarly consideration to many other areas of academic practice.

Much as the sharing of international perspectives has improved teaching and research in geography education, similar dividends are likely to accrue from taking international collaborative approaches to challenges such as improving the professional development of early career geographers; bringing about change in undergraduate and graduate curricula; strengthening the leadership abilities of department chairs and heads; promoting synergistic educational activities between geography and other disciplines; engaging geographers in community outreach and public policy and doing more to prepare students for geographical careers in business, government and nonprofit organizations. Achieving progress through international collaboration and exchange in areas of academic practice such as these will require geographers to be aware of the discipline’s institutional status in different international contexts. As documented in an earlier *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* Symposium (Kong, 2007), geography’s institutional status varies internationally on the basis of research funding availability, educational policies, economic conditions,

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changing demographics, employment opportunities and many other factors. In some countries, the discipline is witnessing unprecedented growth in student enrollments, broadening awareness of the relevance of geographic expertise for confronting societal challenges, rising demand for geographically skilled workers and enhanced interest in research collaboration from other academic quarters. In other countries, however, geography seems to be marking time and is, in some cases, fragmenting. Even in places where geography is relatively strong, the discipline faces acute challenges in protecting its gains as institutions continue to feel the effects of the recent global economic crisis.

In this context, the INLT workshop in Washington gathered together participants to collaborate on the development of manuscripts serving a purpose beyond simply taking stock of current trends and challenges in their respective nations. As the nine papers in this Symposium demonstrate, the workshop succeeded in its aim to identify effective practices that have the potential to enhance geography as an academic discipline internationally through critical reflection of educational research, creative work and educational programs led by geographers and geography organizations in different countries.

The first three papers examine different dimensions of undergraduate curricula in geography. They each make a case for the need to enact reforms or otherwise improve existing curricula, offering concrete suggestions buttressed with examples of how such changes might be implemented. In their paper "Embedding Research-Based Learning Early in the Undergraduate Geography Curriculum", Walkington *et al.* argue that critical thinking and inquiry skills can and should be fostered at the very beginning of undergraduate studies in geography. Through a series of examples drawn from the case studies in different countries, the authors provide a rationale for preparing students as researchers and equipping them with the skills they will need to conduct their own geographical investigations as they progress through their college years and beyond.

But what ought to be the ultimate purpose and format of an undergraduate dissertation or capstone course in geography? This question forms the core of the paper by Hill *et al.* on "Re-framing the Geography Dissertation: A Consideration of Alternative, Innovative and Creative Approaches". While acknowledging the timeless value of the geography dissertation for training students in independent research (and the importance of the associated skills gained from this activity), the authors point out that changing social and economic contexts require students to obtain a broader range of skills and perspectives than those generally provided by traditional dissertations. The authors propose alternative dissertation formats, including capstone projects that engage students in collaborative inquiry and other forms of creative intellectual work that, they argue, are more closely aligned with the needs of present-day society.

Geography programs considering such curricular changes may do well to reflect on the paper "Mapping the Journey towards Self-Authorship in Geography" by Moore *et al.* The concept of self-authoring a program of academic study is in many ways consistent with the aim of producing critical, independent thinkers of the sort envisioned in the first two papers. As institutions of higher education around the world weigh options for designing and managing new forms of curricula, Moore *et al.*'s proposal of embedding principles of self-authorship serves as a promising reform strategy that many institutions, and ultimately learners, can benefit from.

The next two papers in this Symposium explore some of the broader implications of curricular reform for students and their professional development as geographers. As Arrowsmith *et al.* note in their paper "Student Employability and its Implications for

Geography Curricula and Learning Practices”, academic institutions and programs are increasingly being evaluated on the basis of learning outcomes and the relevance of these outcomes for future employment. Though some may reasonably view this trend as an unfavorable imposition of corporate-driven motives on academic practice, the authors persuasively show how the intellectual skills and perspectives that many students acquire through geography already position them well for a wide range of interesting, even lucrative, careers. The authors present a range of examples documenting how academic programs are implementing courses, internships and other educational experiences designed to help students understand their abilities in terms that employers will understand and value.

Whalley *et al.* address similar concerns in their paper on “Curriculum Development—producing *geographers* for the 21st Century”. They review various formulations and conceptions of geography curricula and what it means to be a geographer in different national settings, and how this variance implies a need for taking different approaches in curricula for producing the next generation of geographical practitioners. The questions they raise with regard to program review and curriculum assessment resonate in many interesting ways with the preceding papers.

Certainly the power of any curriculum, not to mention the prospect of introducing innovative pedagogies and implementing change, relies heavily on the pedagogical talents and expertise of academic staff. This is one of the many reasons why investing in the professional growth of early career academic staff is foundational to the continued viability of academic geography programs. In their paper “Professional Development in Teaching and Learning for Early Career Academic Geographers: Contexts, Practices and Tensions”, Vajoczki *et al.* critically examine the discipline-based and more generic approaches to faculty development that geography programs and their affiliated institutions are implementing in different countries. Through this review, the authors identify avenues of research that can be productively pursued through international comparative and collaborative methods, as well as strategies for enhancing the teaching abilities of academic geographers at the very beginning of their careers. The following paper is written by a team of academic geographers at the early stages of their careers. Conway-Gomez *et al.* write on “Tapping Geography’s Potential for Synergy with Creative Instructional Approaches” and explore the many opportunities for interactions within and between disciplinary boundaries. Synergistic initiatives seek to bring together disparate elements to create innovative and socially relevant pedagogy.

Synergy as a strategy to connect to contexts outside the classroom leads neatly into the theme for the final two papers in this Symposium, which look beyond the individual learner to focus on activities undertaken by disciplinary organizations at the departmental and international scales. In a direct challenge to the view of academia as an inward-looking enterprise, Klein *et al.*’s “Dismantling the Ivory Tower: Engaging Geographers in University-Community Partnerships” evinces a future in which geographers are leading a movement toward direct engagement between academic institutions and local communities through service-oriented programs. Through a nuanced examination of literature and related cases of university-community partnerships, the authors reveal a number of ways that geography departments, by virtue of the integrative and pragmatic approaches of the discipline, are well positioned to inform community efforts to promote social and environmental change by sharing the scholarship and educational practices of their academic staff.

Our Symposium concludes with a paper by Donert *et al.* on “International Collaboration in Organisations Promoting Geography Education: Exploring success and acknowledging

limitations". This paper in many ways is a fitting end to the collection, for it reminds us of the incumbent and shared responsibility of individuals and organizations for promoting collaboration in its truest sense: a process characterized by the equitable flow and exchange of ideas, and a shared commitment by all collaborators to produce group work that honors the diversity of perspectives and experiences proffered by individual authors. As INLT and other geographical organizations and communities of practice continue to encourage future collaborations that span the globe, Donert *et al.* consider the very real challenges that often make such collaborations difficult to conduct, yet which also make the rewards so gratifying for so many.

Although the papers appearing in this JGHE Symposium are the major outcome of the INLT workshop in Washington, participants provided a wide range of evaluative comments that illustrate the many benefits of their involvement in the network. More than half of the participants were first-time 'INLT-ers', and they remarked on the success of the workshop in facilitating new contacts and exchange of ideas with colleagues internationally. The face-to-face format of the workshop was cited as being essential for establishing timelines, tasks, responsibilities, and the overall collaborative process for producing the group manuscripts. Another aspect of the workshop that received praise was its friendly and supportive environment that mixed early career and more senior scholars in thoughtful and engaged dialog about educational issues in geography. And it would, of course, be an unforgivable offence to leave unmentioned the festive opening night reception and dinner held at one of the Washington's most celebrated restaurants, Cashion's Eat Place. After all, satiated bodies and lubricated minds are the progenitors of collaboration.

As a past participant in INLT workshops and current North American coordinator of the network, I am delighted that INLT continues to support the development of new scholarly collaborations and professional relationships among geography educators from many parts of the world. On behalf of my workshop co-organizers Mick Healey and Eric Pawson, I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to the workshop sponsors: the UK Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, the AAG's Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education project funded by the National Science Foundation, Taylor & Francis, and the Journal of Geography in Higher Education. Support from these organizations and programs significantly lowered the costs of the workshop and, indeed, made it possible to waive registration fees for several postgraduate students.

I hope you find this Symposium to be informative and insightful for your academic practice, and I look forward to crossing paths with you at an INLT workshop or conference session in the near future.

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