# THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY IN UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULA IN THE UNITED STATES

THESIS

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By

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The discipline of geography has undergone many changes over the past thirty years. One of the most significant changes that has taken place has been the change in emphasis on the study of regional geography at universities and colleges across the United States. This is significant for several reasons. First, regional geography has played an important role in the history of the discipline of geography. During the first half of the twentieth century, regional geography *was* geography (Pudup 1988, 370). Richard Hartshorne, in his books *The Nature of Geography* in 1939 and *Perspective on the Nature of Geography* in 1959, championed regional geography, claiming that its strength lay in synthesizing information in order to understand regions. Second, regional geography is what the general public expects from geography. College students with little geographic background view these courses as "typical geography" (Halseth and Fondahl 1998, 335). Third, regional geography is the field within geography where regional analysis is performed. In 1982, John Fraser Hart, as President of the Association of American Geographers, gave his Presidential Address entitled "The Highest Form of a Geographer's Art." In his address, Hart discusses the

importance of maintaining regional studies in the body of geographical research. He states:

> All the different strands of geography converge when we try to understand a place, an area, or a region, and not one of them can be ignored, which is further evidence of their relevance. We need them all in order to understand regions, and we need the concept of the region in order to understand why we need the diverse and variegated systematic subfields of geography (Hart 1982, 18).

Hart believes the integrative nature of regional geography is its strength, and therein lays its value to the discipline.

This change in the emphasis on regional geography has been one of controversy within geographic circles. Some have supported the change, viewing regional geography as an archaic approach to a field that would be better served by implementing scientific methodology (Pudup 1988, 370). Others have lamented the change, because, as John Fraser Hart stated in his 1982 Presidential Address to the Association of American Geographers, "the highest form of a geographer's art is producing good regional geography" (Hart 1982, 2). While these two sides have failed to agree on regional geography's worth to the entire discipline, there is one point that is not in dispute: that the status of regional geography has undergone changes at the university level. These changes will be the focus of this thesis.

# CHAPTER II

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

This research seeks to examine the change in the emphasis on regional geography in a manner that has not been performed before. This will be done by examining two factors that are gauges for determining regional geography's representation in geography departments: the number of faculty with regional specializations and the number of regional geography course offerings and the resulting enrollments. By gathering data on these two aspects of regional geography's representation in colleges and universities around the country, the exact manner in which these changes occurred will be revealed. These changes will then be compared with the view of the changes in the literature to see if the data actually support what geographers believed has happened to regional geography. By providing such evidence, this study will add strength to current and future arguments for a re-evaluation of regional geography's position within the discipline of geography.

The second question this research will address is whether or not regional geography remains an invaluable part of the discipline. The answer to this question will be gained by analyzing the changes in the emphasis on regional

geography from the perspective of the definitions of what are considered to be the core elements of geography. Three key sources will be used to provide these definitions, as the conceptual framework of this study. The differences in the definitions from these sources will be utilized to illustrate another perspective on the changes in the discipline of geography with regards to regional geography's status within it. This portion of the study will show whether or not the discipline of geography holds these definitions to be true.

In answering these two questions, this research intends to provide an understanding of regional geography's current position within the discipline of geography. By understanding the emphasis on regional geography in the past compared with the emphasis on regional geography today, hopefully this research can provide clues as to what direction regional geography's emphasis within the discipline of geography is headed in the future.

# CHAPTER III

## METHODOLOGY

In order to perform the research necessary to document and gain insight on the nature of the changes in emphasis on regional geography, two parameters for the study had to be set. These two parameters were timeframe and the number of departments making up the sample.

The first year of data to be analyzed was the most critical factor for the timeframe. 1970 was chosen as the first year of the study. Also, this allowed the timeframe of the study to be set at thirty years, thus bringing the analysis of the decline to 2000 (present day at the onset of data collection). Five-year intervals for data collection were set to make the volume of data manageable, and to emphasize the trends in the decline. Thus, data for seven years (1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000) were collected.

The sample of departments was selected from the departments in the United States listed in *Guide to Departments of Geography in the United States and Canada 2000-01*. This guide is a publication of the Association of American Geographers. The departments selected from this guide were required to at least offer a bachelor's degree in geography. As a result of the year in which the guide was published, only geography departments that currently exist were used in the

study. This is important because these departments would be the ones that would most likely benefit from the results and conclusions of this study. Two hundred and fourteen departments from across the United States composed the sample.

In order to examine the representation of regional geography among the faculty, the *Guide to Departments of Geography in the United States and Canada* was used to collect data on number of faculty, rank distribution, and number of regional faculty and their region(s) of specialization. The number of faculty and the number of regional faculty were critical variables because they will help determine the degree of representation regional geography experienced among the faculty.

Rank distribution will be important in determining whether regional geographers are being replaced as they retire by comparing the percentages of the regional faculty of each rank to the percentages of all the faculty of each rank. Faculty were grouped based on four categories: full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, and lecturers/instructors. Emeritus faculty were excluded from the study because it is impossible to determine, on a consistent basis, whether these faculty are active in teaching and/or research for any given year. Adjunct faculty were grouped within the category they were listed, such as adjunct assistant professors being grouped with assistant professors. However, undifferentiated adjunct faculty were placed in the lecturer/instructor category. This same method for categorization was used for visiting faculty and part-time faculty.

Regional specializations are important for several reasons. First, they were used to distinguish between regional faculty and other geography faculty. Regional specializations also give a good indication that the faculty member is engaged in research and/or teaching a course on that region.

The guide for each year of the study was examined for which departments from the sample were listed. However, in order to qualify, the faculty of the departments had to at least list their specializations. If no faculty ranks were available, the total number of faculty and total number of regional faculty were still counted towards the total for that year. If no specializations were listed, then the faculty could not be compared on the basis of regional faculty to total faculty.

For each year, a database for all the information was created so that the following figures could be calculated:

- The number of departments reporting
- The number of total faculty
- The rank distribution with percentages of each group among the total
- The number of total regional faculty
- The rank distribution with percentages of the total number of regional faculty
- The average number of total faculty per school
- The average number of regional faculty per school

The purpose of these numbers is to gain an understanding of the representation that regional geography has among the faculty ranks for each year of the timeframe being studied.

The other portion of this study examines what has happened to the number of regional course offerings and regional course enrollments over the same time period. This will allow the researcher to show the other side of the departmental role in regional geography's decline as well as how the students have reacted to the decline. Course offering and enrollment data were collected using the *Directory of College Geography in the United States* (now *Schwendeman's Directory of College Geography in the United States*). It is important to note that world regional geography courses were excluded from this portion of the study. From this directory, the following data for each university and college in the sample were gathered for each year of the timeframe:

- The number of regional course offerings
- The enrollment figures for each course
- The region of study indicated by each course

The number of regional course offerings allows this research to show the decline of regional geography within the curriculum. As fewer regional geography courses are offered, the number of opportunities for students to study regional geography decreases as well. The number of courses being offered has additional value because it is determined by the department. If the department no longer feels that regional courses offer anything to the students, there is no reason

to offer them. Likewise, if the department lacks the staff to teach such courses, they will not be offered. This last point will allow the course offering data to reinforce conclusions drawn from the regional faculty data.

The enrollment figures for each course will be used to gauge how student demand for such courses has changed during the decline of regional geography. The major issue is whether or not student enrollment has a positive correlation to the number of course offerings. It should on the overall scale, but for each year, a calculation of the average number of students enrolled in each course offered will be used to illustrate this point more clearly. This figure will provide a method for estimating student demand for such courses, a key component of regional geography's value to the discipline.

In order to answer the second portion of the problem statement, a conceptual framework was formed to provide evidence of regional geography's position as a key component of the discipline of geography. Justification for this concept may be found in three seminal documents which have framed geographers' thinking about the core of their discipline. The first of these was William D. Pattison's article from the May, 1964 issue of *Journal of Geography* entitled, "The Four Traditions of Geography." In this article, Pattison states:

> ...the work of American geographers...has exhibited a broad consistency, and that this essential unity has been attributable to a small number of distinct but affiliated traditions, operant as binders in the minds of members of the profession. (Pattison 1964, 211)

One of these traditions is the "area studies tradition" (Pattison 1964, 213). He cites Richard Hartshorne's thoughts on this tradition, particularly his 1939 book

*Nature of Geography*, as being especially significant. Pattison continues, stating that this tradition:

> ...helps towards restoring the faith of many teachers who, being accustomed to administering learning in the area-studies style, have begun to wonder if by doing so they really were keeping in touch with professional geography. (Pattison 1964, 213)

Pattison is stating that one of regional geography's strengths is that it is the link between higher education and elementary and secondary educators. By providing common ground, teachers can identify connections between their training and their careers.

The second statement that supports the concept that regional geography is a central tenet within geography is found in *Guidelines for Geographic Education*, a document prepared by the Joint Committee on Geographic Education of the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers in 1984. *Guidelines* first articulates the notion that geography has five "central themes" representing the core of geographic education (Joint Committee on Geographic Education of the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers 1984, 3). One of these themes, listed on page 7 of *Guidelines*, is "Regions." In the description of this theme on the same page, the region is described as "the basic unit of geographic study." The importance of regional studies within geographic education is further reinforced on page 19, where, under the heading of "World Geography (two semesters), Grades 7-9," the authors state, "The second semester [of world geography] should provide the opportunity to study the five basic geographic themes as they apply to selected regions and to the relationship

between regions." By stating this, the authors also establish regions as a tool for unifying all five themes within the curriculum.

The third document validating the concept that regional geography is essential to the discipline of geography is *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994*. It was developed by the Geography Education Standards Project on behalf of the American Geographical Society, the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for Geographic Education, and the National Geographic Society. In the Preface on page 9 of *Geography for Life*, the standards that were developed were intended to "identify what American students should learn." This document put forth a set of eighteen standards that were grouped within six essential elements to be used as the national standards for K-12 geographic education throughout the United States. On page 34 of *Geography for Life*, one of those six essential elements is identified as "Places and Regions." The standards proceed to outline what levels of regional understanding and skills students should possess at the end of the 4th, 8th, and 12th grade. The key concept embodied in the standards is that the study of regions is an element that should permeate through *all* grade levels.

Discussions of these documents with reference to how they dictate regional geography's importance at the level of higher education may be expected. However, this researcher communicated with Dr. Richard G. Boehm, the Jesse H. Jones Distinguished Chair in Geographic Education at Southwest Texas State University and one of the eight authors of *Geography for Life*, to gain insight on the development of the national standards. He stated that "standards

selection was based upon the [Association of American Geographers] specialty groups" (Boehm 2002). He explained that the specialty groups were clustered together so that sixteen of the eighteen standards were written based on how professional geographers had determined what the cornerstones of geography were. The standards, therefore, represent what geographers at the level of higher education consider the essential elements to be. The regional aspect of geography distinguished itself enough from the remaining clusters of specialty groups to be considered one of the six essential elements.

The concept that regional geography is a central part of the discipline of geography is critical to this thesis for several reasons. The decline of regional geography is of paramount concern because, for thirty years, it has been considered as one of the key concepts required for a quality education in geography. If attitudes towards regional geography have shifted to the point where it is being phased out, then perhaps its place within geography needs to be rethought.

# CHAPTER IV

## DATA ANALYSIS OF THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

### Regional Geography Faculty Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the results of the total faculty and total regional faculty data collection, with number of schools reporting data and the average number of total faculty and total regional faculty per school. Due to source availability, 1974 data was used in place of 1975 data for all faculty analyses. This table shows that while the average number of faculty per department remained fairly constant, the average number of faculty with regional specializations declined by 52 percent. The manner in which the decline happened is perhaps the most interesting aspect of these data.

The vast bulk of the decline took place between 1970 and 1985, with regional faculty per department decreasing by 48 percent. This is interesting because, during this time period, the Quantitative Revolution would have had its greatest impact on regional geography. The Quantitative Revolution, which began in the 1960's, was seen as the development that largely contributed to the decline of regional geography (Hart 1982, 4). The Quantitative Revolution infused geography with mathematical formulas and analyses in an effort to create

## TABLE 1

### Faculty Data 1970-2000

| | 1970 | 1974 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of departments reporting** | 90 | 98 | 113 | 160 | 189 | 197 | 214 |
| **Total faculty** | 1100 | 1190 | 1399 | 1824 | 2210 | 2341 | 2769 |
| **Average faculty per department** | 12.2 | 12.1 | 12.4 | 11.4 | 11.7 | 11.9 | 12.9 |
| **Total regional faculty** | 623 | 579 | 493 | 575 | 689 | 700 | 707 |
| **Average regional faculty per department** | 6.9 | 5.9 | 4.4 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 3.3 |

a more structured and rigid methodology than before. These techniques would serve as the tools which the systematic geographers could utilize in their research. Likewise, geographical researchers were introduced to the scientific method, which provided a framework for performing research and developing theory. Research was merited on the basis of how strongly it adhered to the method. Regional synthesis and descriptive studies became unattractive methods of research. With the Quantitative Revolution, regional geography had become "old-fashioned."

Regional geography supposedly did experience a revival under the guise of "new regional geography" in the mid-1980's. This revival replaced the descriptive approaches with the scientific methods in the field of regional geography (Pudup 1988, 370). The lack of change between 1985 and 1995 most likely ties in with the revival of regional geography in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

These data not only show the decline of regional geography in departments, but also its importance to departments as well. In 1970, 56% of the faculty was regional faculty. By 2000, that percentage had dropped to 26%. Even during the seemingly static years between 1985 and 1995, the degree of representation that regional faculty possessed in departments was declining, going from 32% in 1985 to 31% in 1990 to 30% in 1995. Particularly alarming is what has occurred between 1995 and 2000. The number of faculty per department increased by one faculty member, while regional faculty experienced its first decline in fifteen years.

The first three five-year increments of the study are slim in terms of sample due to the data sources. For those years, the AAG guides only listed graduate programs. For the remaining four five-year increments, departments that only offered bachelor's degrees were included. This helps to explain the small drop in the number of faculty per department between 1980 and 1985. The bachelor's-only departments brought the average down slightly because they typically have significantly fewer faculty.

The difference in number of departments does illustrate further proof of the decline of regional geography. When comparing the numbers of regional faculty for the years 1970 and 2000, there is only a difference of 84 faculty. However, 2000 had 58% (124) more departments than 1970. Although some of these departments may not have existed in 1970, it is safe to speculate that, given the degree of representation regional faculty had in 1970, that many more regional geographers were working in departments around the country in 1970 than in 2000.

These data do require a few caveats, however. Most important is the significant difference between the numbers of sample schools for each year. In order to demonstrate the difference due to sample size, Table 2 shows the data from 2000 for the 90 departments from 1970. This comparison does show that quite a bit of difference is due to sample size. However, if anything, this comparison reinforces the fact that the decline has occurred, even more than the original data comparison does. For the 2000 data using the 1970 sample, the average number of faculty per department increased by nearly five faculty (40%)

## TABLE 2

**Year 2000 Data for the 1970 Department Sample Compared to Total Year 1970 Data and Total Year 2000 Data**

| | 1970 (1970 sample) | 2000 (1970 sample) | 2000 (2000 sample) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of departments reporting** | 90 | 90 | 214 |
| **Total faculty** | 1100 | 1540 | 2769 |
| **Average faculty per department** | 12.2 | 17.1 | 12.9 |
| **Total regional faculty** | 623 | 346 | 707 |
| **Average regional faculty per department** | 6.9 | 3.8 | 3.3 |

from the 1970 data. This increase is the biggest difference between the samples. However, the average number of regional faculty declined by 44 percent. For this sample, regional faculty went from a 56% representation among the total faculty in 1970 to a 22% representation in 2000. This comparison also shows the influence that the inclusion of bachelor's-only departments had on the data. Their inclusion masks the increase in the number of faculty per department, thus tempering the degree to which the decline of regional faculty representation has occurred.

These numbers do much to show the decline of regional geography. However, they do show that regional faculty were employed in significant numbers in the years closest to the present day. 707 faculty members will not retire or leave the academic profession overnight. However, depending on the seniority of these regional faculty, a significant portion could leave the profession by way of retirement within five to ten years. The next part of this analysis examines the rank distribution of the regional faculty, comparing it to the rank distribution of the total faculty in geography departments around the country.

Table 3 shows the rank distribution of the total faculty for each year. The numbers of each rank and subsequent percentages may not equal the total numbers for each year due to the exclusion of faculty from departments that did not report rankings. From these data, it is clear that the rank with the most representation in departments around the country for the entire time period has been full professor. The numbers for associate and assistant professors are comparable, with the two ranks exchanging second and third throughout the

## TABLE 3

### Rank Distribution of Total Faculty 1970-2000

| | 1970 | 1974 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Full professors (% of total)** | **322** (29%) | **403** (34%) | **554** (40%) | **727** (40%) | **870** (39%) | **906** (39%) | **976** (35%) |
| **Associate professors (% of total)** | **248** (23%) | **303** (25%) | **409** (29%) | **487** (27%) | **551** (25%) | **583** (25%) | **638** (23%) |
| **Assistant professors (% of total)** | **324** (29%) | **354** (30%) | **296** (21%) | **378** (21%) | **554** (25%) | **598** (26%) | **709** (26%) |
| **Lecturers/Instructors/ Part-Time/Undiff. Adjunct Faculty (% of total)** | **105** (10%) | **54** (4%) | **75** (5%) | **168** (9%) | **198** (9%) | **217** (9%) | **446** (16%) |

years. The only anomaly in this data set is the unusually high percentage of lecturers, instructors, part-time faculty, and undifferentiated adjunct faculty in 2000. While the numbers of the other ranks between 1995 and 2000 increase to some degree (most likely due to the difference in sample size), the number in the final category more than doubles.

Table 4 shows the rank distribution of the regional faculty for each year. Again, the numbers of each rank and subsequent percentages may not equal the total numbers for each year due to the exclusion of faculty from departments that did not report rankings. These numbers show that the rank distribution patterns match up quite well with the patterns over the time period that were observed for the total faculty. What is striking about these data is that the percentage of full professors among the regional faculty is considerably higher than the percentage of full professors from the total faculty. This is particularly true during the years where the decline in the number of regional faculty was at its peak. The high percentage of regional full professors, coupled with the low percentages of regional assistant professors, indicates that as the senior regional faculty retired, they were not replaced at the same rate with regional faculty. Thus the regional faculty across the United States had fewer young professors to do regional geography research and/or teaching regional geography classes for the years to come. This phenomenon of the early to mid-1980's seems to be reversing itself as the percentage of regional assistant professors has been increasing over the past 15 years. However, the fact remains that, among regional faculty, the percentage

## TABLE 4

### Rank Distribution of Regional Faculty 1970-2000

| | 1970 | 1974 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Full professors (% of total)** | **210** (34%) | **250** (43%) | **261** (53%) | **314** (55%) | **343** (50%) | **340** (49%) | **316** (45%) |
| **Associate professors (% of total)** | **157** (25%) | **146** (25%) | **140** (28%) | **141** (25%) | **159** (23%) | **158** (23%) | **166** (23%) |
| **Assistant professors (% of total)** | **156** (25%) | **134** (23%) | **58** (12%) | **80** (14%) | **146** (21%) | **172** (25%) | **184** (26%) |
| **Lecturers/Instructors/ Part-Time/Undiff. Adjunct Faculty (%of total)** | **41** (7%) | **11** (2%) | **13** (3%) | **20** (3%) | **31** (4%) | **24** (3%) | **41** (6%) |

of full professors remains much higher than the percentage of full professors within the overall faculty.

There is one other set of data which should be of concern to the discipline of geography. Table 5 shows the number of departments that had no regional faculty for the years of the study. Also shown are the number of departments for the year and the percentage that those departments with no regional faculty represent of the total. This table illustrates several interesting points. First, the only year of the study where every department had at least one regional geographer on staff was 1970. However, this is also the year with the smallest sample of departments. But a crosscheck of the departments listed showed that five of the departments with no regional faculty in 2000 actually had regional faculty in 1970 (the other ten departments from 2000 with no regional faculty listed no data in 1970). One of these departments actually went from having 14 regional geographers on staff in 1970 to *zero* in 2000 (while experiencing a decrease in staff from 18 to 12). Second, through all the years, only four universities had no regional geographers on staff for at least four of the years of the study. Of these four, two had regional geographers in 1970 (both employed two that year), and the other two departments did not exist until 1972 and 1975. This shows that there are only a very small number of departments that consistently do not hire regional geography faculty. Finally, these data match up with the trends observed from other data. 1985 was the peak year for the percentage of departments lacking any regional faculty. This percentage declined

## TABLE 5

### Departments With No Regional Faculty 1970-2000

| Year | Number of Departments with No Regional Faculty | Total Number of Departments Studied | Percentage of Departments with No Regional Faculty |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1970** | 0 | 90 | 0 % |
| **1974** | 6 | 98 | 6.1 % |
| **1980** | 8 | 113 | 7.1 % |
| **1985** | 14 | 160 | 8.7 % |
| **1990** | 12 | 189 | 6.3 % |
| **1995** | 16 | 197 | 8.1 % |
| **2000** | 15 | 214 | 7.0 % |

significantly in 1990 (coinciding with the "rebirth" of regional geography). The subsequent spike that occurred in 1995 is interesting, but upon a closer examination of the 1995 data, along with a comparison to the 2000 data, this researcher concludes that it was more a result of sample size than anything else. The actual percentage of departments with no regional faculty is more than likely closer to the percentage in 2000.

## Regional Geography Course Offerings Data Analysis

Table 6 shows the regional geography course offerings data for each year of the study. Take note, once again, that these data exclude world regional geography courses. In this table, the departments reporting data are based on the total sample of 214 departments used for the faculty analysis. Before 1985, departments reported to Schwendeman's specifically what courses they offered and the enrollments for those courses. However, some departments simply reported enrollment without adding how many regional courses were represented by that enrollment. These departments are noted in the "Departments Reporting Only Enrollment" category. In order to get a better sense of the decline of course offerings, the average number of course offerings per department was calculated with and without the inclusion of those departments offering no regional geography courses. These averages were all calculated excluding the number of departments for which no specific course offering information was found. From this table, it can be observed that from 1970 to 2000, the total number of regional courses offered by departments declined by 47 percent. The

## TABLE 6

### Regional Geography Course Offerings Data 1970-2000

| | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Departments Reporting Data (t=214)** | 194 | 200 | 208 | 174 | 188 | 188 | 178 |
| **Departments Offering No Regional Courses** | 4 | 9 | 11 | 8 | 10 | 11 | 18 |
| **Departments Reporting Only Enrollment** | 3 | 12 | 3 | - | - | - | - |
| **Total Number of Regional Courses** | 974 | 805 | 666 | 564 | 603 | 579 | 500 |
| **Average Number of Regional Courses per Reporting Department (A)** | 5.09 | 4.28 | 3.25 | 3.24 | 3.21 | 3.08 | 2.81 |
| **Average Number of Regional Courses per Reporting Department (B)** | 5.21 | 4.49 | 3.43 | 3.39 | 3.38 | 3.27 | 3.12 |

**(A) – Including schools offering no regional courses**
**(B) – Excluding schools offering no regional courses**

average number of regional courses for all reporting departments declined by 45 percent. The discrepancy between the total course offering decline and the average course-offering decline is due to the difference between the number of departments reporting data for 1970 and 2000. Finally, the average number of regional courses for departments offering at least one regional course declined by 41 percent. These are significant declines in the amount of regional courses offered by geography departments around the United States. The major drop in the number of courses offered occurred between 1970 and 1980, once again indicating the impact of the Quantitative Revolution on regional studies. From 1980 until 2000, regional course offerings only declined by 13.5 percent (9 percent for departments offering at least one regional course) for all departments, less than half of the decline observed in the preceding decade. But the decline is continuing; no year was observed to have a higher average than the previous year. Even using the average number of courses offered by departments with at least one regional course for 2000 and multiplying it by 30 (the difference between the number of reporting departments in 2000 and in 1980, the year with the highest number of reporting departments), the total number of regional courses being offered does not even exceed the total number tabulated for 1990. Even more disturbing is the fact that, although 2000 had the second-lowest total number of departments reporting, it showed a far higher number of departments offering *no* regional geography courses. Ten percent of the reporting departments for 2000 offered no regional geography courses. The year with the second highest percentage of reporting departments offering no regional courses was 1995 (5.8

percent). Even though the average number of courses being offered has not declined by much, the near-doubling in the amount of departments offering no regional courses is a trend that should be cause for concern. Also, there is no observed increase in the late 1980's and early 1990's that would show the impact of the revival of regional studies. Even though the total number of regional courses offered increases from 1985 to 1990, the number of reporting departments also increases by fourteen departments, enough to put 1985's total number of courses higher than 1990's if calculated with either average from 1985.

These data should be analyzed with caution, however, particularly the data for the years after 1980. After 1980, Schwendeman's Guide changed formats, so that reporting was done based on the guide's specified regional divisions. Thus, the true number of courses being offered is most likely obscured. Some departments may have reported, for example, a course on Latin America twice in the guide, with the enrollment for that one course listed twice under Schwendeman's categories of *Middle America* and *South America*. Thus, what is actually one course would be counted as two in this analysis. On the other hand, a department offering two courses, one on Southeast Asia and one on East Asia, would have to combine the enrollments under Schwendeman's category *Asia*, resulting in two courses being represented as one. Also, because the data was gathered for one year, only the courses offered for that year were counted. This fails to account for regional courses that may only be offered every other year, but are offered by the departments nonetheless. Even with these shortcomings, these

numbers are adequate for generalization purposes, thus they serve this study's purpose.

## Regional Geography Course Enrollment Data Analysis

Table 7 shows the regional geography course enrollment data for each year of the study. In this table, the departments reporting data are based on the total sample of 214 departments used for the faculty analysis. As in the course offering data, before 1985, some departments simply reported enrollment without adding how many regional courses were represented by that enrollment. These departments are noted in the "Departments Reporting Only Enrollment" category. Once again, average enrollment in regional courses per department was calculated both including and excluding those departments which had no regional course enrollment.

From 1970 to 2000, the total enrollment in regional courses declined by 51 percent. The regional enrollment per department declined by 47 percent. Finally, the average regional enrollment for departments offering at least one regional course declined by 42 percent. The discrepancy between decline of the total enrollment and average enrollment per department is once again due to the differences between the number of departments reporting data for 1970 and 2000. These declines in enrollment parallel those gathered from the course-offering data.

The enrollment data show even greater evidence for the impact of the Quantitative Revolution on regional studies. In 1980, total enrollment (from a

TABLE 7

**Regional Geography Course Enrollment Data 1970-2000**

| | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Departments Reporting Data (t=214)** | 194 | 200 | 208 | 174 | 188 | 188 | 178 |
| **Departments Offering No Regional Courses** | 4 | 9 | 11 | 8 | 10 | 11 | 18 |
| **Departments Reporting Only Enrollment** | 3 | 12 | 3 | - | - | - | - |
| **Total Regional Enrollment** | 50,745 | 33,995 | 22,680 | 22,522 | 31,597 | 31,817 | 24,935 |
| **Regional Enrollment per Reporting Department (A)** | 261.6 | 169.9 | 109.0 | 129.4 | 168.1 | 169.2 | 140.1 |
| **Regional Enrollment per Reporting Department (B)** | 267.1 | 177.9 | 115.1 | 135.7 | 177.5 | 179.7 | 155.8 |

**(A) – Including schools offering no regional courses**
**(B) – Excluding schools offering no regional courses**

greater number of reporting departments) had dropped 55 percent from what it was in 1970. The average enrollment for all reporting departments was down by 58 percent (57 percent for departments offering at least one regional course). These are staggering declines, especially since enrollment numbers are reasonably good indicators of student interest. However, unlike the number of course offerings, which have continued to decline slowly since 1980, enrollment showed a recovery from the mid-1980's to the mid-1990's. In fact, for departments offering at least one regional course, regional enrollment per department was at its highest point since 1970 in 1995. This would lend more strength to the argument that there was a revival in regional studies during that time period. Unfortunately, that revival has not sustained itself, as evidenced by 2000's numbers. For the first time in twenty years, enrollment numbers declined, with the average enrollment per department dropping by 17 percent (13 percent for departments offering at least one regional course). While not nearly equal to the numbers observed from the 1980's, this decline is alarming after fifteen years of steady increase in enrollment figures.

The enrollment figures must be looked at with the same caution as the course offering numbers. Because of the change in Schwendeman's format after 1980, enrollments were reported and grouped into Schwendeman's specified regional categories. Thus, as with course offerings, true numbers may be obscured to a degree because the enrollment for one course may be counted twice (under two different categories). However, unlike with the course offerings, if two separate courses are combined under one category, that portion of the total

regional enrollment is accounted for, despite being from two courses. Enrollment in courses that are only offered every other year would be excluded from this data set, as well. However, the enrollment data require one more caveat that came to the researcher's attention while recording the data. It was observed that a few departments had round numbers (1,200, 200, 600, etc.) for all courses, year after year. For example, one department listed for four consecutive years of the study listed 1200 students being enrolled in a Geography of North America course. Such regularity caused this researcher to question the validity of the reported data. Very few courses at any *university* have the exact same enrollment for consecutive years, much less for a period of fifteen years. This department may be reporting course capacity instead of actual enrollment. Once again, these numbers are useful for generalizations about the decline of regional geography.

## Regional Enrollment Per Course Data Analysis

Because course offerings and enrollments are interdependent, an analysis of the two together was performed to gather an understanding of enrollment per course during the time period. Table 8 shows the results of that analysis. In this table, the enrollment for those departments that only listed enrollment is listed in parentheses below the number of departments. Enrollment-per-course data was calculated after subtracting the enrollment for departments that did not report course numbers during the years 1970-1980.

These data show the most intriguing trends of any data analyzed in this study. Once again, the enrollment-per-course declines from the mid-1970's to the

## TABLE 8

**Regional Geography Enrollment Per Course Analysis 1970-2000**

| | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Schools Reporting Only Enrollment** | 3 (553) | 12 (2083) | 3 (1213) | - | - | - | - |
| **Total Number of Regional Courses** | 974 | 805 | 666 | 564 | 603 | 579 | 500 |
| **Total Regional Enrollment** | 50,745 | 33,995 | 22,680 | 22,522 | 31,597 | 31,817 | 24,935 |
| **Enrollment per Course** | 51.5 | 39.6 | 32.2 | 39.9 | 52.4 | 54.9 | 49.9 |
| **Percent Change from Previous Year** | (n/a) | -23% | -19% | 24% | 31% | 5% | -9% |
| **Percent Difference from 1970** | (n/a) | -23% | -38% | -23% | 2% | 7% | -3% |

mid-1980's, most likely a result of the Quantitative Revolution. Likewise, there is the subsequent increase that was observed in the enrollment data analysis from the mid-1980's to the mid-1990's, most likely a result of the revival of regional studies during that time. However, the enrollment-per-course data have one difference from any other data analyzed in this study: the highest enrollment-per-course was *not* in 1970. It was in 1995. In fact, both 1990 and 1995 had enrollment-per-course figures slightly higher than 1970's figure. Although there has been a subsequent decrease from those years to 2000, even 2000's figure is only three percent down from the figure for 1970, a much lower decrease than the near-fifty percent decreases that have been observed in every other facet of this study from 1970 to 2000.

Again, the same care should be taken with these enrollment-per-course numbers as were taken for the numbers that were used to derive them. Because true numbers of courses and enrollments cannot be gathered to a fine degree of accuracy from Schwendeman's (particularly after the format change), these numbers must be viewed with some caution. By excluding those departments which only listed enrollments and not the number of course offerings, this research has adjusted for one of these limitations.

# CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing all aspects of this study, the data show that regional geography at the undergraduate level has indeed undergone a steep decline over the past thirty years. In almost every aspect of this study, regional geography has declined by almost half over the past thirty years. Much of this decline has been shown to occur in the late 1970's to early 1980's, as a result of the Quantitative Revolution's impact, no doubt. The late 1980's and early 1990's did see a revival of regional geography, or at the very least, a slowing of the decline. But, in 2000, the decline in all aspects had returned. It remains to be seen if this is just a result of year-to-year variation, or the beginning of regional geography's demise. The most disturbing trends within these data are the growing number of departments that lack faculty specializing in regions and/or lack regional course offerings.

In many ways, the different portions of this study feed off one another. Faculty research interests often drive which courses are offered. As the number of regional specialists decline, fewer regional courses are offered, which in turn causes fewer geography students to have the opportunity to become familiar with studying geography from the regional perspective. As fewer regional geographers are trained, fewer still enter the teaching profession, thus perpetuating the cycle.

Regional geography, like any other sub-discipline of geography, cannot exist without all variables of the equation. It must have professionals trained in regional studies, teaching regional geography courses to students who are interested in regional geography. Even the best teachers are barely adequate without training in the field they are teaching. Poorly trained teachers would negatively affect enrollment, which would in turn negatively affect course offerings. This would result in fewer ways for regional geographers to be trained, thus continuing the decline.

Even the major positive note in this research should be looked at with scrutiny. Although students are taking regional courses at almost the same level when compared with years past, why have regional courses not experienced a growth in enrollments similar to what has happened for total university enrollments? Dr. Byron Augustin, professor of geography at Southwest Texas State University, in his presentation, "World Regional Geography: The Extinction of a Species" at the International Symposium on Geographic Education: Theory, Research, and Practice, asked the same question. He stated that, "[b]etween 1989 and 1999, total enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities increased by almost 1.2 million students (12.8%)" (Augustin 2001). Geography, and regional geography in particular, should have increased by the same percentage during this period if student interest remained the same. He observed a five percent decline in total geography enrollments. In comparison, between 1990 and 2000 in this study, total regional geography enrollment, according to this study, declined by twenty-one percent and enrollment-per-course declined by

4.7 percent. If interest had remained the same among the new students enrolling in universities, there should have been an increase. Unfortunately, there has been no such increase. In fact, regional geography's decrease is much worse than the discipline of geography's decrease.

These data do support the notion that regional geography is still an essential part of the discipline. There is still substantial representation of regional studies at most schools within the study. Perhaps regional geography's decline is not as severe as it may seem. Recalling the three sources which put forth the concept that regional geography is an essential part of the discipline (see Table 9), regional geography has not so much lost its place as it has had to make room for other critical components. In Pattison's article, regional geography represented one of the four traditions. In *Guidelines for Geographic Education*, regional geography was one of the five themes within geography. Finally, in *Geography for Life*, regional geography was one of the six essential elements. Over the thirty year period between Pattison's article and *Geography for Life*, regional geography had to make room for two more major parts of geography. It is possible that the decline has not been so much to rid the discipline of regional geography as it has been a result of the diversification of geography as a whole.

For most departments, the definitions of geography that have regional geography as one of the core elements hold true. However, what is to be assumed about the departments that lack any faculty specializing in regions and/or lack regional course offerings? Are the students in these departments receiving an incomplete education in geography? According to what is considered essential to

## TABLE 9

**The Four Traditions, The Five Themes, and The Six Essential Elements of Geography**

| The Four Traditions | The Five Themes | The Six Essential Elements |
|---|---|---|
| • Spatial Tradition<br>• Area Studies Tradition<br>• Man-Land Tradition<br>• Earth Science Tradition | • Location<br>• Place<br>• Relationships Within Places<br>• Movement<br>• Regions | • The World in Spatial Terms<br>• Places and Regions<br>• Physical Systems<br>• Human Systems<br>• Environment and Society<br>• The Uses of Geography |

the understanding of geography as a discipline, the answer would be yes. If the numbers that lack any sort of representation of regional geography within their departments continue to grow, this will result in one of two situations: either an increasing number of geography majors will graduate with an incomplete understanding of the discipline of geography or the definition of what is essential to geography will have changed such that regional geography is no longer considered to be one of geography's central tenets.

This researcher argues that either of the aforementioned consequences that could result from the continued decline of regional geography could be harmful to the discipline of geography. More than ever, given the continued globalization of the world's economy and the need for a better understanding of people from different parts of the world, regional geography has much to offer not only geography majors, but the general public as well. Also, perhaps most importantly, because regional geography is what the general public identifies as "typical geography," the continued decline of regional studies puts the discipline of geography at risk of losing its identity, which would be the most tragic consequence of all. Future research providing a deeper understanding of the decline of regional geography and its possible causes will be useful in preventing this most unfortunate possible outcome.

# CHAPTER VI

## AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research provides an understanding of the decline of regional geography at the undergraduate level across the country, it is by no means an all-inclusive study. Several aspects of the decline still merit analysis in order to gain a true scope of regional geography's decline.

First of all, this study only examined the course offerings at the undergraduate level. An examination of regional course offerings at the graduate level would be useful in determining if training in regional studies is continuing beyond the undergraduate level. This would provide a better understanding of the decline in regional faculty. If there are fewer opportunities for future faculty to continue studying regions at the graduate level, that would be cause for fewer faculty to have regional specializations.

There does exist reason to suspect that the regional faculty numbers may take a significant decline within the next few years. During the data collection phase for the faculty portion of this study, this researcher noticed that often some of the regional assistant professors had earned their terminal degrees as early as some of the senior full professors. This would put them on a similar timetable for retirement as those full professors, yet in the data given in this study, they are

counted as part of the group of regional geographers for years to come. Further analysis should be done on the faculty, giving facts such as year the terminal degree was earned consideration. A study such as this may give evidence that the faculty aspect of the decline of regional geography is even more critical than was shown in this study.

Another facet of regional geography that deserves consideration for future research is the regions themselves. This research should look at two questions: which regions are the faculty specializing in and which regions have courses devoted to them? Some regions may not be declining as fast as others in either aspect. Students may, for example, receive ample opportunities to study Europe and North America, but fewer opportunities to study Asia and Latin America. It would be very interesting to see how the options for study within regional geography have changed over a similar time period. For faculty, a question that could yield intriguing results would be how the number of specialists in multiple regions has changed over the past thirty years. If there are fewer multiple-region specialists today than in 1970, then the decline of regional geography is more severe because fewer total regions are represented among the faculty. If six regional geographers with two regional specializations apiece retire, and are replaced by six regional geographers that only have one specialization apiece, that results in a net loss of six regions being represented among the faculty. If this is indeed the case over the past thirty years, then the decline of regional geography is more serious than this study indicates.

There does exist one possibility for future research that further strengthens the argument that regional studies still deserve a place within geography departments. An analysis of the amount of regional courses required by degree programs over the thirty-year period could show this. If the frequency of regional courses being required for graduation with a degree in geography has declined significantly, then enrollment-per-course numbers provide an even stronger case for the continued inclusion of regional studies in geography programs. If students are taking such courses at a high frequency without being required to take them, then clearly it is because these courses offer content of great interest to the students.

These areas for future research would provide a better comprehension of the exact nature of the decline of regional geography in geography departments across the country. Hopefully, by broadening the understanding of regional geography's decline in the future, faculty and administrators can uncover solutions to halt the decline and, hopefully, reverse it.

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