MY WAY TO APPLIED GEOGRAPHY

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The challenge to write this essay has been very good for me. While self-assessment is difficult, I was enticed to stop and reflect on something I had never addressed during my rewarding career—just how and when did I become an applied geographer, or if I did at all? As Dick Boehm outlined questions and thoughts related to this essay, his one query I thought most profound was "...things most critical to your evolution as an applied geographer?" The keyword here is evolution. My possibly becoming an applied geographer was very much evolutionary rather than revolutionary. I had no great revelation or singular moment or mentor. Rather, my morphing from a traditional geographer into what I am today was brought about through decades of experiences—some in the classroom or other academic setting, but with the most meaningful experiences coming from the real-world at the overlap of an academic working in the arena of the practicing planner. My truly formative experiences may be found in the relationship between academic geography and the practicing planner attempting to solve many of the world's problems. The genesis of my unrest with traditional geography probably began with frequently asked questions such as—"Hey Bob, what's the capital of Maine?... or which state produces the most corn?" I was being confronted with a realization that most people did not know or care about geography or what geographers do.

Through the years I developed a strong philosophy that one of the best ways to learn was to teach, and what makes a truly good planning-applied geography professor is to practice what you teach. Students and real-world clients know when you're teaching them or participating in various plans and projects that your expertise is not simply from your research or what you've acquired through the literature, but most importantly comes from the fact that you've "been there and done that."

Applied geographers are a unique breed, separate from our traditional discipline colleagues and partners in other disciplines, where we work (in that we think and practice) often outside of the box. We look at things from a unique perspective, usually a more holistic viewpoint, not hampered by the expectation that we need to stay within the confines of a given discipline or

school of thought. While the devil may be in the details, the solutions for many real-world problems come from our ability to evaluate challenges from a larger, more integrative viewpoint. We strive to determine how factors interrelate, regardless of the parameters of the traditional discipline. We determine how to best identify, assess, and modify the synergisms of all meaningful interwoven parts of the problem.

On many of the plans, projects, and programs I've been involved with over the last five decades, I've always been astonished and excited by the respect and value that practicing planners, public administrators, engineers, politicians, etc. have for what an applied geographer brings to their table. It is through a symbiotic approach involving others that we are able to solve problems. For us to continue to explore and expand on problem solving relationships, we must identify, inspire, and mentor our young students and colleagues who exhibit promise to become applied geographers-planners. This is what I'm deeply involved with today. I'll return to this most rewarding facet of my career later in this essay, but let me get back to the major challenge of this essay, which is how, when, or if I became an applied geographer?

My story starts a little over half a century ago at a small university in northern Wisconsin where as a young and struggling student enjoying the newly discovered and seemingly endless freedoms of college life, I found myself caught in the clutches of a pre-engineering curriculum, quickly becoming a victim of Calculus I. Academic probation, a stint in the army, and getting married all helped me amend my ways. Upon my return to the academic world, I decided that the sciences rather than engineering were for me. It was then I discovered geography, located in a combined Geology/Geography Department in the School of Science. I finally settled on a dual science major, Geology/Geography and Biology.

I found geography to be a very refreshing approach to education since it didn't have the traditional firm boundaries found in other disciplines. It was much more open-ended, often embracing the tenets of other disciplines in its loosely woven fabric of a discipline. My grades improved dramatically, as did my commitment to learning and completing a Bachelor of Science degree with dual majors. Following graduation I worked in the grain business, but after a couple of years decided that I wanted to enter graduate school in geography at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

While working toward that degree, I had the good fortune to study with such greats of our discipline as Glenn Trewartha and Arthur Robinson. The pursuit of the Master of Science in Geography further kindled my deepening respect for this seemingly all-encompassing, unconfined way of thinking. Upon completion of the Master's degree, I returned to familiar turf in north-

ern Wisconsin, finding a position in planning with the Head of the Lakes Council of Governments, which operated both as a Council of Governments (COG), and a Metropolitan Planning Organization.

There I worked in land-use and transportation planning under a Planning Director who was a self declared applied geographer. It was under his direction and mentoring that I discovered the strong relationships between applying my classical geographic knowledge and skills with the needs of the planning world. I was excited to find that geography had so much to contribute to its companion discipline of planning, and vice-versa, planning to geography. It soon became apparent to me that applying geographic expertise to the solving of planning problems did not involve the use of unique and separate skill-sets, but rather was the pairing of the interrelated skills of applied geographers, planners, and engineers operating in a continuum. I discovered that geographers would often be doing much of the background studies and research, while the planners, engineers, and public officials carried those studies, research, and findings into the decision-making fray of the political/private sector. During this time I found I had good people skills and the talent for successfully bringing plans and projects to fruition. If there ever was a discerning revelation in my career, this probably was it.

With the M.S. degree and the knowledge and expertise gained at the COG, I was offered a teaching position at the University of Wisconsin, Superior (UW-S). It was there that I initiated the Community Development Institute, a joint planning effort for a consortium of Wisconsin universities. This institute encouraged students and participating universities to assume active roles in solving community problems through planning efforts. It was during this time at UW-S, that I was asked and accepted the challenge of starting the first city planning efforts for the City of Superior, Wisconsin.

With each new challenge I became more aware of the vast possibilities of the inter-relationship between geography and planning. Excited and clear about the potential opportunities of these interrelated disciplines, I decided to return to Madison and pursue a Doctorate degree in planning, geography, or better yet, some combination of the two. The Geography Department kindly allowed me a very flexible approach to a Ph.D. in their program. I was permitted to craft my own unique degree program, embracing civil engineering, planning, economics, and sociology along with my geography coursework. I completed my Ph.D. in Geography with a minor area in Civil Engineering in 1976, having taken as many engineering as geography courses. The influence of engineering, its scope of learning, professors, and graduate students were instrumental in reinforcing my desire to continue my career as a planner-applied geographer.

Following the completion of coursework for my doctorate in 1973, I began to seek a teaching position which would enable me to complete my degree and to continue to employ the combined skills I had developed through on-the-job training and formal coursework. Fortunately at this time, I learned of an open position in the Geography Department of a Texas university that seemed tailor-made for me. It had a distinct applied geography program with concentrations in Urban and Regional Planning, Resource and Environmental Studies, and Cartography-Photogrammetry. To my delight, 2007 marks my 34 year at Texas State University–San Marcos. During these three plus decades, the department has grown from only six faculty members to over 30; the university from about 6,000 to more than 27,000 students; and from 65 to more than 500 majors. In 1983 the faculty developed the first Master of Applied Geography degree in the United States. Much of the effort in developing this new, innovative degree program was spear-headed by Drs. Boehm, Harrison, and myself. Upon completion of the requirements and coursework content of the proposed degree program, we mused over countless euphemisms as to what we should call it. After concerted and spirited discussions with the department faculty, and with a stroke of sheer genius, we finally decided to call it what it was...a Master of Applied Geography degree. While most of what has been accomplished at Texas State has greatly enhanced its position as a national leader in applied geography, many things were left undone, and many harsh lessons remained to be learned.

Soon after my arrival at the university in 1973, I found two department colleagues who shared my enthusiasm for planning. One would leave after three years to eventually become Deputy Director of the Texas Air Control Board. The other, Jim Harrison, would become a trusted colleague, mentor, and friend until his retirement in 2004. In a short period of time, I was able to institute a new course in Solid Waste Planning and Management, and take over the responsibility of teaching Transportation Systems and Land Use Planning. I taught these courses from the perspective of a planner/applied geographer.

Thirty years ago, in the May 1977 issue of *The Professional Geographer*, Professor Harrison and I authored "Geography and Planning: The Need for an Applied Interface," which I invite you to read. From the title of this article, one can see that Jim and I were talking about formally strengthening the relationship between applied geography and planning, and the need to institutionalize such efforts at the university. The department name was changed to Geography and Planning during the late 1970's. The department faculty and university would expand the Master of Applied Geography (MAG) degree program by offering courses at off campus locations.

The ranks of undergraduate students in applied coursework and those in the MAG program were becoming legion. In 1994, a change in departmental leadership was followed by a major effort to develop a new Ph.D. program in environmental geography and in geographic education. In 1996, the department of geography began offering the first Ph.D. programs in the history of Texas State University–San Marcos. The new chair concluded, with a majority of faculty support, that to accommodate the forthcoming Ph.D. program the department had to be more "pure" in its direction—Planning was removed from the departmental name in 1996. The decades old interest on the part of various faculty members to institutionalize the applied geography-planning continuum at Texas State appeared to be over.

With that reality clearly now entrenched in departmental policy and practice, I began directing my energy to private consulting activities outside the department. I started a small planning firm to prepare comprehensive city plans, and write regional and state solid waste plans. Over the ensuing years, I became an acknowledged expert in land use and solid waste management issues at the state, regional, and national levels. My services as an expert witness in waste management lawsuits were in demand. Also during this time I directed 12 annual conferences on solid waste management for the professionals in Texas.

These highly successful conferences were sponsored by what is now the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). In addition to serving as a consultant to the TCEQ continuously since 1976, I also practiced as a consultant to engineering firms, law firms, cities, and other political jurisdictions.

It was also during this time I was fortunate to be awarded distinguished honors from three different disciplines. The first honor came in 1995, when the National Council for Geographic Education awarded me its annual Distinguished Teaching Achievement Award. In 1999, I was named the Public Administration Professor of the Year by the CenTex Chapter of American Society for Public Administration. The third award came in 2000, when I was presented the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Texas Chapter of the American Planning Association. I believe my having received awards in three seemingly separate disciplines, positions me as an applied geographer, and as a planner that was able to transcend traditional disciplinary lines with success and respect. Perhaps the boundaries between these disciplines are not so rigid, but rather there exists a continuum among the three.

With these continued personal successes, I remained convinced that our students at Texas State still wanted and needed an applied geography program, particularly one interfaced with planning. It was during this time, that

I greatly increased my personal efforts to mentor more of our promising students to become applied geographers/planners. At this same time, I was asked by the TCEQ to conduct an inventory of the closed municipal solid waste landfills that existed in Texas. This state mandated project was a great opportunity for me to involve many of our geography graduate and undergraduate students in a large scale applied geography project. With about $1 million in contracts, I hired 25 students over a five year period to use applied geographic research techniques to locate, catalog, map, and populate our GIS with data on nearly 4,200 closed landfills in Texas. This was memorialized in nearly 10,000 pages of attribute files and maps divided into a 24 volume atlas that was adopted by the TCEQ as its official document.

The success of the closed landfill inventory prompted additional opportunities to involve Texas State faculty and students in a more detailed Phase II Closed Landfill Inventory for six Texas COGs. We also contracted with three COGs to develop their State mandated Regional Municipal Solid Waste Plans. After successfully completing these obligations, I decided to organize and initiate a more formal approach to securing additional state and federal grants and contracts. With our new organization, the TCEQ/TSU Partnership Program, I could hire students, faculty, environmental professionals, and engineering firms to partner with me and the TCEQ to solve some of their real world environmental problems. With the receipt of over $700,000 in FY 2003 contracts from the TCEQ, we opened the Texas Pollution Discharge and Elimination System's Stormwater Runoff Permit Processing Center and internship program. The first year funding was part of a three year umbrella contract totaling over $2.25 million. During the first year of this new three year contract we provided applied geography experience to four undergraduate and seven graduate students.

Since our beginning in February 2003, we have received over $5 million in funding. After this fiscal year (2007), we will have two years and an additional $1.5 million remaining from our most recent three year umbrella contract. Since the inception of our Partnership Program, a total of 225 students have worked with us. There have been three Ph.D. students, 107 graduate students and 115 undergraduate students from several area universities. All three Ph.D. students have completed their degrees, with two staying on with us in the partnership program as key staff members and applied geography mentors. Students who finish our partnership program typically find excellent employment opportunities in state government or the private sector.

The Partnership Program has been involved in a variety of real-world projects, including the writing of air and water quality permits, environmental monitoring, and the development of counter-terrorism preparedness programs

to protect Texas water supplies. We have developed highly sophisticated audiovisual communications material, and applied GIS techniques to problem solving. In one project we used GIS to help generate a comprehensive resource allocation model that would encourage the TCEQ to better distribute its resources to areas of greatest need. Recently we've added the Texas Department of Transportation to our growing client base.

Finding "my way to applied geography" has not been a well defined route on a geographer's map. It has involved relationships with other practitioners and disciplines, particularly planning and engineering, which have helped to enrich my professional life. To me, my evolution as an applied geographer came about mainly through those professional relationships. My belief that there is a continuum between geography and planning has been reinforced with each new project undertaken. If I were to draw a Venn diagram that best describes the disciplines that have contributed most to my development, one would see the overlapping of planning, applied geography, engineering and public administration. The majority of the overlap, the hub of my professional being, would mostly encompass planning and also applied geography. Does it matter which bin I fit into best, I don't think so. Call me a planner . . . call me an applied geographer . . . both fit fine since I work in the reality of the continuum that exists between the two.