A Report

Status of Geography in Florida, 1989

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As the nation’s fourth most populous state, Florida leads the Southeast in student enrollment and in number of post-secondary academic institutions. It also serves as home to many agencies and organizations, both private and public, that employ professional geographers engaging in activities associated with the geography discipline. Consequently, an attempt was made to survey this broad base via questionnaire, as well as personal contact where possible, to assess the status of geography throughout the State. The overall assessment is both encouraging and frustrating. Geography awareness and visibility has been greatly enhanced during the past year at all levels. Though hampered by traditional budgetary and challenges from other disciplines, geography has advanced considerably, and the future is most promising.

All Florida’s nine state universities, an equal number of private colleges and universities, and 28 community colleges were mailed a questionnaire in early October. Those failing to respond were mailed a follow-up questionnaire three weeks later. The response was most gratifying. (See Appendix.) Eight of 9 (89%) state universities, 5 of 9 (56%) private colleges and universities, and 20 of 28 (71%) community colleges responded. Realizing that geography programs and/or courses are not offered in all surveyed institutions, the author was pleased with the results. Because the survey was designed primarily for academic institutions, input from private and public employers of geographers was obtained via a sampling of telephone calls and/or personal contact. Consequently, this report is a composite of the above, plus the author’s own observations and opinions.
When asked to summarize the collective view of geography faculty at each institution about the "state of geography" in Florida, the comments reflected mixed feelings. At the university level, most faculty sensed substantial improvement and were impressed with recent developments, especially regarding the K–12 geography program. Both the National Geographic Society and the Florida Geographic Alliance were cited for their contributions. It was also recognized as a year in which "the geography field, its utility and applications are being appreciated more than any time in the recent past."

However, at the community college level, almost unanimous sentiment exists among the respondents that geography is woefully inadequate at virtually every level. Most feel that their students are poorly prepared in the field of geography and that the schools and teachers are responsible for this plight. As one instructor reported, "K–12 teachers and college students alike need more training in this area. Many students do not have the foggiest notion where well-known places are. One of my students thought the capital of New Mexico was Mexico City." Criticism centers on the fact that current pedagogical thinking emphasizes relevance, generalization, and utility, and views memorization, discipline, and mastery of facts as old-fashioned and out of step with the computer age. Hence, the community college instructors decry the students' complete ignorance and lack of basic information. Another instructor states that his students are so poorly prepared that "it is very difficult to teach them history, religion, or any of our social disciplines because of their poor knowledge of geography." Several faculty favor making a basic geography course mandatory for all majors as a requirement for the AA degree.
Most private and public employers of geographers appear satisfied with the training and academic background of their employees. They are more interested in mastery of the tools of geography, such as cartography, computers, GIS, etc. than breadth and depth of the traditional discipline itself. A comment shared with the author by a firm employing many geographers was that, “we will train them for our specific needs if they have some basic familiarity with the tools.”

The Florida Geographic Alliance has done much to foster improved visibility of geography in Florida. Comprised of 28 professionals, the Alliance conducts workshops and institutes, and serves as consultant throughout the State to the city and county school systems. During the past year, the Florida Geographic Alliance has held about 40 county, one-day workshops (6 hours), 10 county two-week workshops (60 hours), numerous shorter presentations (1—4 hours); and an intensive 20-hour workshop for 40 teachers in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Florida Council for the Social Studies. In addition, several other geography workshops were conducted at the county level through the Teacher Education Center (TEC) program associated with the State universities. The Florida Geographic Alliance in cooperation with Florida Kiwanis Clubs and the National Geographic Society have instituted a plan to supply local schools with badly needed maps and globes through a Kiwanis Club “adopt a school” plan.

Florida Commissioner of Education, Betty Castor has selected a group of 20 educators for three-year appointments to a State commission to evaluate and improve the role of Social Studies in the K—12 curriculum. This Florida Commission on Social Studies Education includes one geography professor (myself) to insure that

1See the following report on the Florida Geographic Alliance by Ed Fernald.
geography is a strong component in the new curriculum. Already, it appears that geography will play a formidable role at each grade level in the Social Studies curriculum with a year-long geography course proposed at both the sixth and seventh grade levels. At each of these grades the subject will be identified as Geography, not Social Studies. The new curriculum if approved by the State Commissioner of Education will do much to strengthen the role of geography throughout the state school system and better prepare students for advanced study as well as for life itself. It is an exciting breakthrough for the geography discipline.

Geography at Florida's universities is healthy and expanding, as faculty are added and additional positions are advertised. Five of the nine state universities have hired new geography faculty during the past year: including two positions at the University of Florida and one each at Florida State University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, and the University of South Florida. Dr. Robert Aangeenbrug, former Executive Director of the AAG, left his post in Washington, D.C., to assume the Chairmanship at the University of South Florida. Among those recruiting faculty currently for two positions each, according to the AAG Newsletter, are the University of Miami, the University of Florida, and the University of South Florida.

Enrollment in geography programs is increasing along with the expanding and rebuilding of departments according to the reporting universities. The State's largest undergraduate program in number of students (4,041), courses (65), and faculty (13 full-time, 1 part-time) is the University of Florida. Florida State University ranks second in all the above categories (2,000), (50), and (8 full-time, 2 part-time). In order, the leaders in number of students, courses, faculty, and majors among the private colleges reporting are the University of Miami, Stetson University, Jacksonville University,
and the University of Tampa. In number of undergraduate geography majors, however, the University of South Florida leads with 135, supported by six full-time faculty and four part-time. Remarkably, this figure represents almost half the undergraduate geography majors in the state university system (290). At the graduate level, the University of Florida leads in all categories with 155 graduate students, 42 courses, with 20 masters and 7 doctoral candidates.

Of the 20 community colleges reporting, only 16 included geography courses in their curricula. As a group, these two year colleges, with 9 full-time and 15 part-time faculty, taught 55 courses and reached nearly 2,000 students. The four year colleges and universities with 48 full-time and 14 part-time faculty taught 277 undergraduate courses and had an approximate student enrollment of 12,124. The State had an offering of 115 graduate courses and served some 363 graduate students. Much is still to be done to reach, activate, and support the 57 full-time and 29 part-time faculty at Florida’s colleges and universities as well as the 290 undergraduate majors, nearly 100 graduate majors, and scores of undergraduate minors.

Enrollments are strong and student interest is high. National Geography Awareness Week has helped to give increased visibility to the discipline. Numerous international, national, and local surveys continue to focus on America’s geographic illiteracy. This combination coupled with a dedicated core of professional geographers working with teachers and students and supported and encouraged by the Florida Geographic Alliance, Florida Society of Geographers, Florida Department of Education, National Geographic Society, and other interested persons and organizations are helping to advance the role of geography at all levels. The status of geography in Florida is appreciably improved over
previous years. A mild revival or renaissance is in progress with renewed interest at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels. More resources are needed to meet this challenge.

Today is a good time to think geography. Florida is a good place to do the thinking. As the State continues to expand in population, the need for geographers and their expertise has never been more apparent. More research is necessary to cope with Florida’s problems of water resources, zoning requirements, pollution, waste management, conservation, transportation, historic preservation, tourism, population pressure, economic growth, demographic changes, etc. The applied geographer and the geography educator are key colleagues working for the future of Florida. As Florida geographers host the 1991 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Miami, the spotlight will be focused on our discipline, our state, and our Florida Society of Geographers. The challenge for national visibility has never been greater.

Appendix: Florida Institutions Responding to the 1989 SEDAAG Department Questionnaire

State Universities (8 of 9)

University of Florida
Florida State University
University of South Florida
University of Central Florida
University of North Florida
Florida Atlantic University
Florida International University
Florida A & M University
Private Colleges and Universities (5 of 9)

Stetson University
University of Miami
Jacksonville University
University of Tampa
Florida Southern College

Community and Junior Colleges (20 of 28)

Palm Beach Community College
Manatee Community College
Polk Community College
Central Florida Community College
Miami-Dade Community College -- North Campus
Miami-Dade Community College -- South Campus
North Florida Junior College
Florida Community College
Palm Beach Atlantic College
South Florida Community College
Santa Fe Community College
Florida Keys Community College
Broward Community College
Chipola Junior College
Brevard Community College
Lake Sumter Community College
Hillsborough Community College
Lake City Community College
Daytona Beach Community College
St. Petersburg Junior College