

FIFTEEN PILLARS TOWARDS BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL GEOGRAPHY GRADUATE STUDENT (VERSION 1.3!)

I.

Excel at the knowledge in each introductory geography course.

Failure to do so will be noticed when you try to interact with other geographers who don't do exactly what you do. Good knowledge of the different introductory courses is critical for seeing how many similarities there are between the parts of the discipline. Who knows when you might be asked to teach one of these courses? Enjoyment of many seminars and colloquiums begins with this basic level of knowledge, not with a geographic tabula rasa.

II.

Master geographic communication.

Geographers communicate in many ways: visually, verbally, spatially...can you communicate in more than one way? Can you make maps and geographic diagrams you're not embarrassed to show your cousin? Can you give a talk about your research that is as interesting to the general public as the dream story your 5-year old niece told you last week? Are you prepared to communicate with very different types and sizes of audiences? If you are making presentation slides with a purpose being that you can read off of them...then remove the text from those slides so that you have to actually prepare for your talk. Have you compared your speaking to a speaker you admire lately? Have you prepared analogies between what you're communicating and everyday things?

III.

Cultivate your individual professionalism.

Keep in contact with your professors. Dress for success in professional situations. Be civil in every situation, especially those in which you are fuming. Prepare thoroughly for important situations. Geographers inhabit a 'small world'; what you say today may make all the difference in your professional future. Be timely, and even do things earlier than is required. Learn about the people you expect to interact with. When you interact with someone you don't know personally, a certain amount of formality is recommended. Treat with respect other geographers (in other words, everyone) you might meet. An audience is not opportunity to show off or protest, it is an opportunity your ability to operate within the profession. Listen to others.

IV.

Acquire the largest set of well-honed tools you can muster.

If all you have is a hammer, every problem begins to look like a nail to be hammered. Is your specialty quantitative geography? Then make it a point to learn one qualitative method really well. Are you qualitative and/or number-fearing? Take the time to learn a quantitative tool to the point where you can teach it. Attack your own methodological

weaknesses rather than using them as defensive weapons. Use your tools once a year to keep them from being rusty. Can you describe why a person should use a particular tool in a given situation, rather than another?

V.

Do not be mastered by your tools.

“Methods gurus” often have difficulty interacting with non-methods gurus. This is noticed when getting a job, tenure, and promotion decisions are being made. Remember that even the great ancient mapmakers were more interested in what the maps depicted, not the making of the map itself. If you’ve just developed a method for which there is no real geographic need, it might be time to reassess your decision-making paradigm. Tools follow geographic research questions, not the other way around. Have you been outside (and not thinking about methods) lately?

VI.

Maintain a bell curve of geographic knowledge.

Geographers are often perceived as knowing “a little of everything, and not enough of anything”. They often also have the opposite problem (see the Fifth Pillar for an example). Avoid both of these traps by building a “bell curve” of geographic knowledge. Know two or three topics very well, to the point where you can publish on them. Know several topics well enough that you can help those in those sub-fields and so that you can understand articles on those topics. For the remainder of geography, know enough about the various subjects that you can have basic conversations about them. Getting better than the “bell curve” shape is extremely difficult because these fields are always changing and advancing, and it is impossible to keep up with everything.

VII.

Pick research topics that are actively being funded and published.

It is tough to get funded to do things that are not being actively explored by others, and it is much more difficult to convince potential manuscript reviewers that your work is relevant if nobody else agrees enough to work on similar topics. Well-researched subjects are often passé, and nobody will understand you if your topics are too futuristic, eclectic, or off-the-wall. Find that delicate balance wistfully called the “cutting edge”. Those are the people other people want to have working with them.

VIII.

Exude a certain level of self-confidence without declining into cockiness.

Geographers are social creatures just like anybody else; they may respond irrationally to body motion cues, they may fall under the sway of dominance hierarchies, and they may have capricious emotions. Having self-confidence in interactions with other geographers usually requires you to know a lot about your topic, and to have good communication skills as well. Beware that your self-confidence does not plummet into over-confidence

and thence into cockiness; that would be worse than not having enough self-confidence. Learn to deploy your ego at will, rather than wearing it on your shirt-sleeve. Everyone likes confidence, no one likes arrogance.

IX.

Ruthlessly develop geographic empathy.

Empathy is the ability to be able to put yourself into the mind of another person; it is useful for understanding the motivations people have for doing the things they do. As most people think about geographic topics differently than you do, having empathy for their situations makes you extremely useful in understanding the world. This is true even if you profoundly disagree with their thought and actions...in that case, remember the first rule of war: "know your enemy". Your job is to learn and teach, not to rant and argue. Empathy and worldliness are quintessential goals of geography, and the two are related to each other.

X.

What is "geography?"

Geography graduate students often tire of this question, mercilessly beaten into them over a period of years. It can be perceived to be a sign of disciplinary weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are many correct answers to this question, and these answers are applicable to different people and situations. It is a tremendous strength that we have such diversity. In your own work, figure out how to answer this question to different people...your mother-in-law, your thesis or dissertation committee, the president of the AAG, the sister discipline researcher, the potential employer...

XI.

Know your people.

Who are the experts in your geographical subfield? What are their geographical backgrounds? How do they link, professionally to each other? How do they link to other geographers in the past? How and when have they linked to people outside of geography? How do you connect with intellectual currents of the discipline's past through your connections with other geographers? The reality is, you might one day be talking with some of these people at a conference or a job interview, and they'll know if you don't. Knowing your people can be true joy; literature reviews come to life once you start interacting with other professional geographers.

XII.

Be active in geographic circles.

Present at state, regional, or national meetings, wherever people are working on similar topics. Email other geographers beyond your university when you have a need for an answer only they can provide. Volunteer to help run an organization, a session, a field trip, a workshop. Be prepared to collaborate with everyone, not just kindred spirits. Most

geographers are far more likely to give their time to someone who lacks knowledge but is willing to work hard to get it rather than someone who knows a lot but is a slacker. In other words, activeness in the geographic community is the doorway to being known as a geographer.

XIII.

Publish and procure, or else perish.

For geographers, the world has utterly changed since the 1990's. Before that it was sometimes possible to get great geography jobs with little or no publications. Now, such a circumstance is quite rare, especially in academia. Competition with fellow geographers may not be a topic we stress in every class, but in the real world of "games" such as job competitions, getting good students, obtaining research funding, competition is the law of our land. Scholarly publication and acquisition of grants and awards is the dominant way that geographers gauge excellence in a geographic subfield. In many ways, publishing papers, getting grants, and winning awards beyond your own institution is on the same level or more than is successful completion of a dissertation.

XIV.

Become intellectually familiar with a sister discipline.

Interdisciplinary communication is the path of our times. Geography has deep interconnections with a number of sister disciplines, and has so throughout its history. Most good geographers spend some of their time interacting with researchers in another discipline in a research manner. This is especially important for getting grants and jobs at smaller institutions. To know when you're ready to do this, test yourself: can you pick an issue of a scholarly journal in that discipline, and find at least one article that you could read and actually extract some understanding?

XV.

Perfect your answer to the mother-in-law question.

When asked "what do you do?" by your mother-in-law, can you answer this in two sentences in a way that is interesting enough to generate additional interest and questions? You will find that you use this answer many, many times in many situations, and a good answer can lead many interesting experiences in life.