

## NO BAD LANDSCAPE

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In an academic world continually threatened with budget reductions and ever-more-relentless calls for a wholesale redirection of departmental funds into technological upgrades, it is difficult to do something manifestly orthodox. In a professional world in which there is an ever-more-constant drumming about your ears for increased scholarly productivity and grasping at national visibility, it is difficult to do something that involves fiscal or temporal start-up costs. And in a teaching world that seems enthralled with every possible digital enhancement of the spoken word, it is difficult to do something so plainly pedestrian as talking directly to and with small groups of students.

In other words, these are very hard times to speak up in favor of a class in old-fashioned, locally focused, low-tech field geography. Conceding these academic realities, I'd nonetheless like to promote the academic and professional merit of stepping up to the motor-pool counter, ordering a van, and taking a dozen or so students out to do battle with the realities of the local world. No battle is more fun to win; few victories bring greater personal and departmental rewards. And, beyond that, there is no bad landscape. Let me explore these domains.

### DEPARTMENTAL DISINCLINATION TO SUPPORT LOCAL FIELDWORK

The current rush in many a college and university is toward increased class size, experiments in distance learning, and—in a manner of contradiction—replacement of graduate teaching assistants in the classroom with ladder faculty whenever possible. The field class is a major problem in two of those three categories. It is as small as a seminar, and its content transports over uplink lines with less efficiency than any classroom lecture material. However, on the real-faculty-interacting-with-real-students front, it is perfect. In terms of class size, there is no arguing about its rich ratio and steep cost. However, there is an intensity in the interaction between faculty and students, both graduate and undergraduate, that has a value one can use to offset exhortations for increased class sizes. The weapons to be used are *development* and *retention*, two new terms that currently shadow virtually all university administration innovations.

When students take on the task of participating in a local field class, they are casting aside the likelihood of being able to disappear behind a bland wall of other students who function as a buffer between the professor and the reluctant class members. In a field class—just as in a small-section foreign-language class—all students are confronted with a need for responsiveness, reaction, and participation in problem solving in every single class period. Although a student may not view this as good news, it is precisely class situations such as these that capture the mind and

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