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Geography Lost: The Why of Where

By **MARK HARPER**
Education Writer

Blaize Carroll, a 10-year-old boy from Ormond Beach, has slept with a mosquito net over his bed and awakened to the croaks of frogs and calls of monkeys.

He has gathered freshly laid eggs for his own breakfast. He has played soccer in the streets and even felt a volcano rumble.

He has been to Costa Rica several times and is going back for a month this summer.

What his parents, Lance and Elana, have given him -- perhaps without fully realizing it -- is a lesson in geography. Listen to what he's learned.

"When you read out of a textbook, it is a lot harder to understand than going to a place and doing what they're doing," Blaize said.

Geography has been mostly off the map in American schools for more than 50 years. Even while there is a move to expand the subject -- both in the nation's K-12 and higher education systems -- teachers find they still must review basics before they can get into depth.

Some geographers argue the lack of geographic basics has been at the root of much of the United States' overseas troubles in the past 30 years, from the economic and political crises of the 1970s to the quagmires of Vietnam and Iraq. While some campaign for more of a steady diet of geography in American schools, lawmakers have yet to make it a priority.

At DeLand High School, many of the best students take Advanced Placement courses, and two years ago, Paul Ryder, a social studies teacher, introduced an AP course on human geography for 10th-graders. As a pre-test, Ryder has given students a world map and asked them to identify as many of the world's countries as they could.

"The average is between seven and 10," he said.

Perhaps even more disappointing to geographers was the National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs survey of 18- to 24-year-old Americans last year. Despite daily news coverage of wars dating back five years, only 1 in 10 could find Afghanistan on a map of Asia, while 63 percent failed to identify Iraq on a map of the Middle East.

It wasn't always like that.

The number of students enrolled in geography in American colleges and universities grew tenfold in the first half of the 20th century, according to Murphy's article in the January "Journal of Geography in Higher Education."

But in 1948, Harvard University President James Conant dumped the school's geography department, famously saying, "Geography is not a university subject."

Over the next 40 years, even as some schools expanded geography, many of the nation's leading institutions -- including the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, Yale, the University of Michigan, Columbia, Northwestern and the University of Chicago - eliminated their geography departments.

"America abandoned geography in 1948 and we haven't won a war since," said Jerome Dobson, a professional geographer-turned-professor at the University of Kansas. "It sounds outrageous to say it, but there's an element of truth to it. Our choices of where to fight have been real mistakes."

While not all geographers agree, Dobson contends a better geographic understanding could have brought a different result in

Iraq.

"We didn't distinguish one country from another and one Muslim from another, and we made a huge monolithic categorization that any Muslim who's misbehaving, we'll (fight)," said Dobson, who is president of the American Geographical Society.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Alexander Murphy, a geography professor at the University of Oregon, recently wrote a comprehensive article on the state of the subject in education for an academic journal.

American elementary, middle and high schools had for decades marginalized geography to "a list of location facts to be memorized," he wrote. More recently, though, schools have been expanding geography, he said, noting a steady increase in the number of high school students taking the AP course.

About 100 students at DeLand High have taken that course in each of the past two years, while most Florida students have two years of geography in middle school.

In higher ed, more students are earning geography degrees, while many schools are adding geography programs.

Yet college students often find geography by accident. They enroll in international business or political science, take a required geography course and begin to understand that it's more than rote memorization and maps, said Bruce Bradford, a veteran geography professor at Stetson University. Only a handful of students are majoring in geography at Stetson, where environmental science is a more popular major.

At Florida State University, the number of students majoring in geography has tripled since 1990.

Since that time, FSU has added a doctoral program and a new applied master's degree in GIS. Students are seeing that there are good job opportunities in geo-demographics, navigation systems and emergency management, said Victor Mesev, the department chairman.

Author Neil Smith, a geographer at City University in New York, traces the resurgence in geographic interest in the United States to the economic crises of the 1970s. With the rise of OPEC and other events, American corporations began to "scour the world to have a sense of what was going on," he said.

Still, the hesitancy to embrace geography is complicated.

Murphy believes perhaps the first reason for geography's second-class status in American schools is "a combination of isolationism and growing global dominance that made many Americans think they really didn't need to know much about the rest of the world."

That's no longer true in a global economy.

By the late 1980s, the near-annual surveys exposing Americans' lack of geographic information led to Congress declaring a National Geography Awareness Week and a campaign by the National Geographic Society to restore the discipline to American schools, Smith said.

National Geographic continues that campaign today, sponsoring a national geography bee and promoting best teaching practices as a way to bring more exposure to the subject.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

While hundreds of teachers have gone through National Geographic-sponsored training programs, policymakers at the state and local levels have been slow to catch on.

Some federal officials are campaigning for more students to go into a field that has been identified as one of the three fastest growing (along with biotechnology and nanotechnology). Brigadier Gen. Richard Lake, director of intelligence for the U.S. Marine Corps, recently spoke at the University of Central Florida in Orlando about the challenges facing the military. A major one, he said, is finding people with a deep understanding of geography.

"Within the U.S. intelligence community, we sometimes reference the War For Talent," he said in a telephone interview. "We

are all looking for people who have a variety of skill sets, and geographic knowledge is extremely important, both in the uniform ranks and as civilian employees."

Even still, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act identifying geography as a core subject, but failing to provide any funding to increase its profile.

The rise of standardized tests, at least in Florida, led to a heavy emphasis on the most basic of basics -- reading, writing and math -- in elementary schools. A January survey conducted by Stetson professor Patrick Coggins reported that of 1,766 elementary school teachers, more than 60 percent agreed with the statement: "Since the introduction of FCAT in Florida schools, social studies instructional minutes have declined." Less than 11 percent disagreed.

More than two in three elementary school teachers teach two or fewer hours of social studies --of which geography is only a small part --a week, the survey reported. Coggins, who directs the Multicultural Education Institute at Stetson, said elementary teachers have told him before FCAT's arrival, they had devoted as many as seven hours a week to social studies.

"Legislators and people of the state Department of Education need to understand what geography is and understand that it's important," said Edward Fernald, a retired geography professor at Florida State University who for 20 years was considered the state geographer. "The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test is not comprehensive at all. It measures reading and math, and they're important and I'm not knocking that. But it leaves all geography out."

There are signs that education policymakers are responding.

Harvard, for instance, brought geography back for the first time in nearly 60 years, launching the Center for Geographic Analysis last year.

In Florida, social studies standards are under revision, said Cheri Yecke, chancellor of the Florida K-12 public school system. And a bill in the Legislature calls for a social studies section to be devised for FCAT.

"We do live in a global economy now," Yecke said. "You can't survive if you're only competitive at the state level."

More and more parents see how terrorism can affect the Florida tourism economy, how the building boom in China can make materials like cement scarce in the Sunshine State and why local growers are impacted by importing tomatoes from Mexico. Teachers say parents want their children to understand the relationships of people and places. They want them to learn geography.

What in the World is Geography? Experts Try to Explain

"Geography is like history. If you go back to Immanuel Kant, he says that all phenomenon exists in time and place. If you study that phenomenon through time, it's history. We all understand what that is. If you study those same phenomenon through space, it's geography, and people don't understand what that is." -- **EDWARD FERNALD**, retired professor of geography, Florida State University

"(Geography is) why people do what they do where they do it." -- **The late J. ROWLAND ILLICK**, former professor of geography, Middlebury College

"Geography is more than you think. Geography is to space what history is to time. It is a spatial way of thinking, a science with distinctive methods and tools, a body of knowledge about places and a set of information technologies that have been around for centuries." -- **JEROME DOBSON**, professor of geography, University of Kansas

Lawmakers Push To Bring Back Geography

Here are current bills lawmakers are considering that could affect the teaching of geography.

FEDERAL INITIATIVES

The "Teaching Geography is Fundamental" Act has been introduced in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Its findings note that: "geographic literacy is essential to a well-prepared citizenry in the 21st century because geographic factors assume greater importance as the world's economies, societies and political structures grow more global in scale."

It also reports that a recent National Geographic survey of people ages 18 to 24 in nine countries found that Americans ranked second to last. Only 13 percent of young U.S. adults could identify Iraq on a map of Asia and the Middle East.

The Senate bill would commit \$15 million for 2008 and the next five years for teacher training, more use of Geographic Information System and research of geography education. The House bill is virtually identical.

STATE INITIATIVES

A bill sponsored by state Rep. Joe Pickens, R-Palatka, would add a social studies component to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test at elementary, middle and high school levels. His bill, as well as a Senate version, would update the Sunshine State Standards with the "World Class Education Standards," including a greater emphasis on history, government and civics.

Cheryl Yecke, chancellor of Florida's K-12 system, said the standards are being redesigned to make students more globally competitive.

"The Sunshine State Standards are directed toward Florida. With World Class, we don't want to just look toward Florida but go beyond," she said

Chris Colwell, deputy superintendent for Volusia County schools, said updating standards and testing for them is reasonable. At the same time, though, he cautioned that other factors, such as the time for teaching and learning, also should be part of the discussion.

"Many European countries have fewer standards per grade level but get more in-depth into them. That would be a direction in which I hope we would move," he said. "Our school day is too short.

"We need to be cautious (that) we aren't a mile wide and an inch deep."

All not lost -- there are students with geography bug

JACKSONVILLE -- After acing their schools' geography bees, more than 100 geography-loving students traversed with parents and teachers across interstates to Terry Concert Hall at Jacksonville University last month to test their knowledge. Being the best meant a trip to the capital where they'd show their skills at the National Geographic Bee.

There was C.J. Miller, who came with his parents from Deltona. An eighth-grader from Deltona Middle School who built his own computer, C.J. likes a lot of things.

"I like math. I like Japanese. I like aerospace, and I like highway engineering," he said.

There was Lara Mirante, a seventh-grader from St. Brendan Catholic School. She credited her geography success to reading and the Discovery Channel, but also had the advantage of travel, having been to Italy, Ireland and Alaska.

There was Devin McDuffie, an eighth grader from New Smyrna Beach Middle School whose height and facial hair caused his mom to bring his birth certificate in case there were questions, because there usually were.

And there were 98 more. For the first round, they disappeared into smaller rooms, where they answered a series of questions.

But these weren't easy questions. The three Volusia County students emerged from the rooms, eliminated. The final 10 took the stage of the concert hall.

Then there were only three: Eva Ludwig, a homeschooled eighth-grader from Ocoee; Stephen Slade, a seventh-grader from Merritt Island Christian School; and Michael Aquilia, an eighth-grader from Farnell Middle School in Tampa.

The manat is to Turkmenistan as the baht is to what? That was the question that stumped Eva. The answer: Thailand.

It came down to Stephen, tall and nervous, and Michael, a shaggy-haired boy who needed to get two correct answers to Stephen's incorrect ones.

"Jin Mao Tower, which has the highest hotel rooms in the world, is located in the Pudong district in which east Asian city?" the

moderator asked.

Shanghai, Michael answered.

Singapore, Stephen said.

Shanghai was right.

Then the final question: "Altamira Cave, known for its prehistoric paintings in the province of Cantabria, is located in the northern part of which European country?"

Michael: Spain.

Stephen: Germany.

The cave is in Spain. In winning the trip to Washington, D.C., Michael gets to do it all over again next month.

Ways to infuse geography lessons into the classroom

It is often said that geography is an integrative field, or one that can be taught during other subjects, such as reading and math.

For instance, the National Geographic Web site nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/matrix.html features hundreds of lesson plans. Titles include: "Mark Twain's Cave," "The Geography of Pizza" and "World View: National Anthems Around the World."

Here are a few ways local teachers have infused geography into classes.

· Deanna McDuffie, a teacher at Edgewater Public Elementary School, had her fifth-grade students send a travelogue to family and friends out of the area. Every time someone receives it, they are supposed to send a postcard from their location. "We have one that's gone international now, and it's over in Europe," she said.

· Pam Nichols, who teaches sixth grade at New Smyrna Middle School, frequently has pupils study photographs for details that might reveal relevant points of understanding.

· About 15 years ago, Ruth Bethea -- a teacher at Ormond Beach Elementary School -- painted a map of the United States on the playground. The map is still there, and her fourth-grade pupils use to to learn directions and state locations.

Make a Career Out of Geography

Where can you earn a geography degree in Florida?

Public schools: Florida State University, University of Florida, University of South Florida, Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University.

Private schools: Stetson University, Jacksonville University, University of Miami.

What school has the largest geography department?

In 2006, Florida State University's geography department had 282 students, nearly half of the entire state public universities' total.

What kinds of careers can a geography major expect?

Many geographers work for federal, state and local governments. There also are private employers, such as the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Google, that hire geographers.

Stetson University reports some of its geography graduates have gone on to become: a city planner, transportation planner,

park manager, environmental projects coordinator, simulation database engineer, environmental lawyer, market analyst, Peace Corps analyst and an international developer.

What about salary?

The American Association of Geographers reported that the median salary for 810 geographers in 2005 was \$63,550. For that same year, an estimated 4,250 geography professors earned an average of \$57,870.

How can one research jobs in the geography field?

The Association of American Geographers' Web site, aag.org, has some helpful material on careers in the field.

SOURCE: News-Journal research

Mapping from crime to natural disasters

Geographic Information Systems -- better known as GIS -- is a tool that local, state and federal governments have using for more than a decade.

By using computerized mapping techniques, layers of data can be laid upon one another, presenting new ways of understanding the world. With the maps, new data becomes available, helping people better understand tornadoes, growth patterns and crime sprees.

Volusia County employs about 100 people who use GIS on a regular basis, said Al Hill, the county's information technology section manager. "We also have a lot more casual users," he added.

The technology is available to all departments. Some examples of how the county's 200 layers of mapping can be used:

- The property appraiser's Web site has a popular mapping function that's available to the public. People can examine public records, check out prospective neighborhoods and even look at aerial photographs of their city.*
- The sheriff's office analyzes crime patterns, helping to identify related cases. It also is used to map locations of sex offenders and to identify auto theft and high traffic patterns.*
- One mapping layer details stormwater runoff, showing every 1-foot rise or fall in land contour for about a quarter of the county. County officials are working on mapping the remainder of the county, which should be available by the end of 2007, Hill said.*

When the tornado of Feb. 2 plowed through Lake County and DeLand, killing 20 people, Volusia County officials had a path mapped out within hours. Those maps were available to all departments, including emergency management, fire-rescue and sheriff's deputies responding to calls, Hill said.

On a wider scale, geographic mapping has been used to estimate the impact of natural disasters, such as the flooding in Mozambique in 2000 that displaced nearly 1 million people.

When he was a geographer at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, Jerome Dobson was part of the core group that developed GIS.

By using GIS before Hurricane Katrina, emergency managers could determine that 3.7 million people were at risk of power outages, said Dobson, now a professor of geography at the University of Kansas.

mark.harper@news-jrnl.com