



## Geography Education in the United States: Initiatives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**Joseph P. Stoltman<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, USA  
Email: stoltman@wmich.edu

In this editorial I will describe three initiatives within geography education in the United States. I am frequently asked by colleagues in other regions of the world to explain trends and the policy decisions that are responsible for the status of and changes in geography teaching. Among the three changes I will discuss are: 1) the second edition of Geography for Life (the national standards in geography); 2) the Road Map Project with its focus on research, curriculum materials and professional development, and assessment; and 3) the Social Studies Curriculum Framework for College, Career and Civic Life (C3). I will describe each of the developments briefly and discuss their importance to U.S. and perhaps the readers will make some linkages to issues in geography education internationally.

Geography for Life (GFL) (*Geography Education Standards Project*, 1994), the national geography standards, was introduced in 1994 during a period when U.S. educational policy was promoting the development of “world class” expectations for students in a range of disciplines. Geography was included due to its long standing and significant role within the kindergarten through secondary school curriculum in most of the 50 states and the

District of Columbia. GFL was published as a geography content resource book for teachers, curriculum specialist, and educational policy makers in state departments of education and local school authorities. The reception of GFL was very positive, but the wheels of change in U.S. education turn slowly. Over the period from 1994 until 2004 there was a steady inclusion of the geography national standards by states within each of the state’s content standards in social studies and to a lesser degree in Earth Science. The adoption of standards often entailed a process whereby states identified components of GFL that were readily accommodated in the state standards structure and those became the focus for the state geography standards. The results were 51 sets of standards for the 50 states and the District of Columbia and the amount of geography ranged from significant to minimal.

One compounding effect for the 1994 national standards process was the curriculum structure that existed within the U.S. at the time and continues to this day. The curriculum within which geography is largely included is the social studies curriculum. State social studies frameworks, or curriculums, generally include history, geography, political science (civics), and economics, but not as equitable members of

the social studies. History has been and continues to be the dominant subject. Other topics are included within social studies content in some states, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and environmental studies. The question of equity among the content subjects that comprise the social studies is further confounded by the fact that many elementary teachers and a majority of high school teachers in the U.S. have considerably more history in their teacher preparation at the university level than they do in the other subjects. Since the founding of the U.S. educational system the school curriculum has been backward looking through history rather than forward looking. In a country of immigrants it has always been a policy priority to determine who we are and what we should resemble as an American civilization. This retrospective approach to the country and its people has the danger of imploding in a society where children arrive at school as digital natives with access to libraries of information on line that were never considered as viable for the curriculum just a decade ago. Social studies must emerge from maintaining storage barns of the past and turn to building launching platforms for the future. Geography has become the dancing partner with history and other social science and science subjects in curriculum design since the futuristic use of information (data) by geography engages the students in predicting and modeling elements of the social and natural systems that are not the main stream concern of history, yet they are systems that history affects and that, in turn affect history. The content and skills necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are undergoing reconsideration for all content subjects, but it is geography that has ventured forward to begin clarifying the question: What is the value of geography education to American society? That response has progressed in several ways and each of them is discussed in the following narrative.

First, the national content standards entitled Geography for Life (Gallagher and Downs, 2012) was refreshed in 2012 by a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition after geographers studied the ways the first edition had been used and examined the ways that other curricular subjects, mainly language arts, mathematics and science, were presenting

their content. Geography educators then focused on the continued adoption of GFL content standards as the platform for sound curriculum development. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition includes the original six elements and 18 standards as were presented in the original document in 1994. However, while the discipline continues to have the same structure for its content, the means for addressing the content studied within geography have evolved to a new and more contemporary stage. It was decided that geography would need to capitalize on its use of technologies, such as remote sensing, GIS (Geographic Information Systems), web based mapping, geospatial data, field mapping using geospatial devices such as smart phones, and the means to use the spatial perspective to communicating the geographic analysis of local, regional, national, and global issues. The realm of geography includes issues that range from land use and its environmental role to cultural/ethnic enclaves and their role in determining the territory of a country. The diversity of geography has been given greater focus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of GFL. The suggestions in the standards for teachers and the curricula they teach are prominent.

With the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of GFL there remain huge challenges for geography education. First is the challenge of building a cohort of teachers who are committed to the role of geography as necessary to prepare students for civic engagement, or citizenship, which in the United States is a hallmark of the rationale for social studies. Secondly, there is a necessity to enact geography instruction in schools as the purveyor of geospatial technologies that are critical tools used for studying and explaining the global economies, resources distribution, urban agglomerations, and population dynamics and the future consequences of each. Those topics are usually studied within particular geographical contexts that are identified by the educational curricula from the local to national levels. Therein lies the importance of geographic information, evidence, and argumentation that is a product of a rigorous, reflective framework of standards that clearly define what students should know and be able to do upon completion of secondary school and what teachers should be able to teach upon endorsement as a social studies teacher. It remains a challenge for

geography educators to clearly identify the importance of the content we teach for developing reasoned expectations for the physical, natural, and human systems of the future. The national content standards are the most comprehensive means for teachers and students to pursue that futuristic objective in the United States.

Second, the Road Map for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Geography Education Project (National Council for Geographic Education, 2013) was completed under the auspices of the National Council for Geographic Education, Association of American Geographers, National Geographic Society, and American Geographical Society. Those professional and academic organizations are the four most prominent proponents of geography education in the United States. The project was funded by the National Science Foundation. It was designed on the premise that:

K–12 geography education is critical preparation for civic life and careers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It also is essential for postsecondary study in a wide range of fields, from marketing and environmental science, to international affairs and civil engineering (p. 2).

The designers of the project further identified five foci for the project that defined the issues faced by geography education. They were:

1. preparation and professional development of teachers,
2. instructional materials to support classroom instruction,
3. assessment of learning outcomes and instructional effectiveness,
4. research on teaching and learning, and
5. cultivation and maintenance of public support (p. 2).

The project appointed committees of geographers, educators, cognitive scientists, and teachers that initially reviewed and critically analyzed the literature regarding research, instructional materials and professional development, and assessment in geography education. The committees then recommended future research agendas that are, based on the analysis, high in priority to the discipline and to

the teaching of geography in schools.

While the three reports are substantial in their review and recommendations, each is currently being used to further geography education on the three major instructional categories and in the garnering of public support. The Road Map reports are extensive and do not lend themselves to a review of the recommendations. However, they are available as web based documents with both executive summaries and full length reports available for review (National Council for Geographic Education, 2013). The Road Map for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Geography Education is expected to have a major impact on the discipline that will continue for longer than a decade. It includes recommendations for collaborative research on the most critical issues that geography education is confronted with as curriculum, teacher preparation, student learning of geography, preparation of instructional materials, the uses of geospatial technology in geography education both in the classroom and in field study, and the developments in the discipline that, with time, may become forces of change for school level geography.

The third development in the U.S. is the Social Studies Curriculum Framework for College, Career and Civic Life (C3) (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). It was a collaborative project among fifteen professional and academic organizations that are engaged in the general Social Studies Curriculum for Kindergarten through the end of high school in the United States. The special interests of the participating organizations ranged from history and civics to geography and law. The C3 represents the first attempt to collaborate by the diverse organizations that are participants in the social studies curriculum. The organizations either provide core content or supplemental materials for teachers and students to address important concepts that complement the disciplinary core content. The C3 document identifies the core content for social studies in the United States as civics, economics, geography, and history. The social studies curriculum is comprised mainly of the four core content subjects and the skills that apply to each.

In the United States, the Social Studies is a single curriculum, much as Science is a

curriculum, that is comprised of disciplines that contribute significantly to what students should learn and teachers should be able to teach in the preparation of students to make decisions, solve problems, and participate in a positive manner in their communities, referred to usually as civic life. The C3 document recognizes the limitations of time for the social studies curriculum. The document identifies the critical, yet realistic, information, concepts, theories, and skills from the core content disciplines deemed necessary for college, careers, and civic life for students in Kindergarten through secondary school. The reality of constraints limiting the time available to teach content has impacted each of the four core disciplines in the past decade. Taking time constraints into consideration, it was not practical or feasible within geography to include each of the 18 national geography standards from GFL in the C3 framework for social studies. Hard choice had to be made that repurposed the content of the 18 standards into four indicators of the geography that was deemed essential as a minimum for success in college, career and civic life. The C3 document builds the argument that the highly significant content of geography to be included within the social studies curriculum should be comprised of the following.

- Geographic Representations: Spatial Views of the World,
- Human-Environment Interaction,
- Human Population: Spatial Patterns and Movements,
- Global Interconnections (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) (pp. 41-44).

The four content foci recommended for geography within the social studies curriculum lend themselves to grade level progressions so that the complexity of the content and the case studies to demonstrate their applications are scalable from the earlier to the later grades of schooling. The selection of four rather than 18 as are presented in GFL permits greater in-depth study and application of content that prepares all students for civic life.

Of course, geographers in the United States

would prefer if all students studied geography as the principal subject in each grade of elementary and secondary school. However, that is not a practical expectation, so the C3 Framework provides an expectation that has been agreed upon by 15 organizations engaged in the social studies regarding what students should know and be able to do as a result of geography education. Geography educators view it as the minimum that is expected in a social studies curriculum. The newly recommended C3 geography, when adopted, will add rigor to the social studies curriculum that currently displays considerable replication and “softness” in its content. The C3 Framework applies content specificity, an inquiry mode of learning, and skills that comprise a social studies curriculum that presents geography as a meaningful subject. However, it is a minimum expectation, and there remains the opportunity for teachers and schools to delve more deeply into the content of geography than is represented in C3 by incorporating further content standards from Geography for Life. The goal of GLF and C3 is to provide students with a 21<sup>st</sup> Century experience studying modern geography within a 21<sup>st</sup> Century context.

The three developments in geography education in the United States have emerged within the past two years and have focused attention on the discipline for teachers, curriculum developers, geography educators, and educational policy makers. There is considerable work to be completed. It will take the support of the professional societies of geographers, the social studies community, early career scholars, and senior scholars to refocus the opportunities for geography education over the next two decades. It must be noted, however, that change in an educational system takes time, and two decades may be fast paced. Changes to the system of education in the United States, if not elsewhere in the world, are painfully slow.

## References

1. Gallagher S. and Downs R. (Eds.), *Geography for Life* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Washington DC, National Council for Geographic Education, 2012.

2. *Geography Education Standards Project. Geography for Life*, Washington DC, National Geographic Research and Exploration, 1994.
3. National Council for Geographic Education, "Road Map for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Geography Education Project", Executive Summary, 2013, [http://education.nationalgeographic.com/media/file/RM\\_ExecSummaries\\_and\\_Ch1-1.pdf](http://education.nationalgeographic.com/media/file/RM_ExecSummaries_and_Ch1-1.pdf).
4. National Council for the Social Studies, "College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards", 2013, <http://www.socialstudies.org/c3>.