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## **Incorporating Geography, Contingently: Geographic Pedagogies in a University Without a Geography Department**

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### **Abstract:**

This article investigates efforts by a small regional university without a geography department to incorporate geography into its general education curriculum as part of a “quality enhancement” process mandated by its accreditor. Drawing on interviews and surveys of students and faculty, we highlight lessons learned that may be useful for institutions considering similar changes—including the importance of valuing disciplinary expertise, addressing faculty contingency, and engaging with existing research on geographic education and pedagogy. The initiative, while limited in significant ways, also suggests opportunities for advocates of geography to engage with agendas around general education reform and accreditation.

### **Key Words:**

general education; accreditation; geography pedagogy; faculty contingency; internationalization

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## INTRODUCTION

This article examines the efforts of a small private liberal arts university in the U.S. South to incorporate geographic learning outcomes into its interdisciplinary general education curriculum. This initiative to incorporate geography was part of a broader quality enhancement process focused on internationalizing the university with the expressed goal of preparing students for life and work in an increasingly interconnected world. While geographers have long recognized the disciplinary opportunities represented by internationalization imperatives (Pandit 2009), the fact that a university without a geography department or any tenure-line geographers would recognize and seek to incorporate geography calls for attention, especially when considered against the backdrop of geography's relative underrepresentation in undergraduate curricula in the United States in comparison to other disciplines (Murphy 2007).

The university's regional accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, requires all institutions to prepare a quality enhancement plan to guide substantive improvements beyond core accreditation requirements as part of the standard ten-year accreditation cycle. Each university selects its own area of focus and develops a plan to be implemented over the course of five years. In 2008, the university, hereafter referred to as Southern Regional University, submitted a plan focused on internationalization. The plan articulates a vision that corresponds to what some researchers have called "internationalization at home" in the sense of developing curricula meant to equip students with a "global perspective," as well as facilitating and supporting international experiences for both students and faculty (cf. Klein et al. 2014; Wachter 2003). While responding to many of the same forces shaping internationalization efforts at other higher education institutions, the plan discusses specific concerns of faculty and administrators at the university, including a relatively geographically homogenous student body that has been drawn, in large part, from the local region and a resulting sense that extra care needed to be taken to ensure that students were encouraged to adopt a more international perspective. In that context, the plan suggests that improving students' understanding of geography would be an important way to achieve those goals. The plan also notes faculty perceptions of the inadequacy of students' prior knowledge and preparation in geography and cites a broader recognition, among a range of stakeholders in the state, that geographic literacy should be a priority.

The quality enhancement plan identifies the university's general education curriculum as the key point of intervention for improving students' understanding of geography, and subsequent decisions were made to focus on integrating geographic learning outcomes into a preexisting sequence of interdisciplinary courses required of all undergraduate students. Drawing on individual and group interviews with faculty and administrators involved in the initiative, as well as surveys of students and faculty in the interdisciplinary general education courses, this article examines how geography was incorporated into the university's curriculum, how faculty taught geography in interdisciplinary general education courses, and how the institution did and did not invest in supporting the initiative. We outline some of the significant institutional and pedagogical challenges that faced the largely contingent faculty members charged with carrying out this initiative in the classroom, and we identify lessons learned from the process. Ultimately, we argue that the initiative is suggestive of potential openings to advocate for the importance of geography in undergraduate education, but we also note that such

initiatives require an infrastructure of institutional commitment, disciplinary expertise, and faculty support and stability in order to achieve their full potential.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION AGENDAS: GENERAL EDUCATION, ACCREDITATION, AND FACULTY CONTINGENCY**

The discipline of geography remains underrepresented in U.S. universities in comparison to many other disciplines, and it is not uncommon for colleges and universities with otherwise broad course offerings to not include any geography coursework, much less independent geography departments. Scholars have offered a range of explanations for this, emphasizing misunderstandings about the discipline's unique contributions as a field of intellectual work, geography's relatively peripheral place in much U.S. primary and secondary education, and/or the broader influence of particular institutional decisions, such as the closing of the geography department at Harvard in 1948 (Smith 1987; Johnston and Sidaway 2016). However, recent years have seen increasing interest in geography. Murphy (2007, 128) has tied growth in geography programs and degrees granted to "(1) a heightened general sense that geography is relevant to the issues of the day; (2) a greater awareness and appreciation of geography among scholars in other disciplines; (3) an explosion of interest in GIScience and GIS; (4) an expanding job market for individuals with geographic training; and (5) the emergence of a more analytically sophisticated geography in some primary and secondary schools." Taken together, these reasons are suggestive of significant opportunities for the discipline of geography.

Of course, perceptions of the value of geography are necessarily tied to diverging institutional priorities and broader political formations. Karen Morin (2013) shows how public discourse about geographic literacy in the United States often links the study of geography with American national interest and economic competitiveness. Morin's account emphasizes that there are a range of reasons that studying geography might be valued, and it suggests that, however eager one might be to advocate for geography as discipline, it also remains important to critically evaluate the impacts and associations of any particular effort to promote geography. Southern Regional University's quality enhancement plan reveals a focus on the competitive advantage geographic education would impart to students. Linking geographic understanding to the broader goals of internationalization, the quality enhancement plan highlights the idea that employers value international perspectives and experiences and situates internationalization as key to adequately preparing students for future employment in a global economy.

In contrast to the robustness of literatures on geography education and internationalization (e.g., Theobald 2008; Pandit 2009; Ray and Solem 2009; Haigh 2014; Simm and Marvell 2017), there is a relative lack of published research and reflection on the integration of geography into general education curricula, despite such curricula being understood by many as central to the purpose of higher education in a liberal arts tradition and a not insignificant part of the experience of students at most U.S. universities (although see Garrett and Hecock 1984; Russo 2004). We frame this as a particularly U.S.-based issue because of the widespread adoption of this model there, but to the extent that a liberal arts understanding of university curricula is mobilized in other contexts, then related opportunities and challenges may well arise (cf. Cheng 2017; Hudson and Hinman 2017). Such curricula frequently feature themes toward which geographers are primed to contribute, including globalization, "diversity," and citizenship (Brint et al. 2009; Fox 2016), and, in practice, we know that geographers are indeed quite often actively involved in designing and teaching such courses. As efforts to reform general education curricula have become a recurring feature of the higher education landscape in the United States (Hachtmann 2012), more published research and reflection on these experiences could lay the groundwork for both better teaching and better disciplinary advocacy.

There is also a need to better understand how accreditation and quality enhancement agendas shape higher education institutions in the United States. Newstadt (2013) argues that accreditation processes and quality assurance discourses are embedded in logics of value inimical to critical scholarship and pedagogy—logics of the sort elsewhere described in terms of academic capitalism and

the neoliberalization of the university (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Saunders 2010). To the extent that accreditation and quality enhancement proliferate audit cultures, they can shift influence and responsibility away from faculty and toward administrators (Waugh 2003; Ginsberg 2011) as well as contribute to accelerating expectations and poor working conditions that are detrimental to individual faculty and to the collective processes of producing meaningful academic work (Mountz et al. 2015). At the same time, accreditation agencies and their quality enhancement efforts do remain, in important ways, in the hands of universities themselves. Their defenders see them as an extension of academic practices of peer review, a form of “consumer protection,” and an alternative to more intrusive accountability measures favored by some outside stakeholders (Brittingham 2009).

The arguments that, on the one side, accreditation and quality enhancement agendas are embedded in damaging changes to the critical function of the university and to the conditions of working therein and, on the other, that accreditation processes are not reducible to neoliberalization and may represent a preferable alternative to other forms of “accountability” present more of a tension than a contradiction. In response to that tension, we suggest a need for finer-grain accounts of what faculty and administrators actually do with these mandates and processes. This requires understanding accreditation and quality enhancement as *political* rather than *technical* processes (Skolnik 2010). Toward that end, we offer a case study of curricular transformation that suggests the possibilities that can be opened up through critically engaging with aspects of quality enhancement processes, even as we show how these possibilities were themselves constrained by other aspects of the neoliberalization of the academy, including, especially, the increasing contingency of faculty labor.

The existence of an academic labor market segmented between tenure-line and contingent positions is well documented, as are the effects of contingency on faculty and on student experiences in the classroom (AAUP n.d.; Bauder 2006; Baldwin and Wawrzynski 2011; Meyerhoff and Noterman 2017; Navarro 2017). Southern Regional University is one that, like many others, relies on the labor of contingent faculty, which we understand as those working off the tenure track, very often without the stability and benefits of continuous full-time employment. In fact, the majority of instructors in the interdisciplinary general education sequence we examine are adjunct faculty hired on a part-time basis on semester-length contracts. As our analysis will highlight, the contingency of faculty members involved in the initiative to incorporate geography is central to how the project proceeded and to the obstacles it faced. More broadly, we suggest that the reliance on contingent faculty speaks to the contingency of the place made for geography in the university’s curriculum.

## CONTEXT AND METHODS

Southern Regional University’s undergraduate curriculum offers many traditional liberal arts majors, as well as training in professional fields like accounting, nursing, and physical therapy. Regardless of major, each student must complete the core general education curriculum, which, at the time of this research, included distributional requirements as well as a series of four interdisciplinary seminars. The only geography course offered prior to these initiatives was introductory human geography, which was an option for fulfilling a social science distribution requirement as well as a required class for students pursuing state teaching certification in secondary social studies education. At times, adjunct faculty taught the course, and there were also periods when it was not offered, requiring social studies education students to take the course at a different local university.

The quality enhancement plan called for an initiative to improve all students’ understanding of geography through incorporating geography into the university’s general education program (see Table 1, which provides a brief timeline of the initiative). The university supported the initiative by opening up a new tenure-track faculty line, advertised as a position in anthropology/human geography. They hired an anthropologist with graduate coursework and an ongoing interest in geography to fill the position. He began teaching anthropology and the introductory human geography course in the fall 2008 semester as well as serving as chair of the geography initiative. In addition to regularly offering the introductory human geography course as an option to fulfill the social science requirement, the

university's interdisciplinary general education core—a progressive series of four courses required for all undergraduates—was selected as the central focus of the initiative. These courses provided students the opportunity to explore important issues from interdisciplinary perspectives, while building core academic skills, such as research, writing, and critical thinking. Individual instructors design the topic and themes for each course. Teaching in the program is open to both tenure-track and adjunct faculty, although, in practice, adjunct faculty teach the majority of courses. For example, in the semester from which we draw our data, adjunct faculty taught eight out of eleven third-year interdisciplinary courses.

With the help of a faculty committee, the chair of the initiative developed a set of six geography standards to guide curriculum development, drawn from *Geography for Life: The National Geography Standards* (Heffron and Downs 2012):

1. Knowledge of how to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, report, and analyze information from a spatial perspective.
2. Awareness of how culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.
3. Knowledge of the physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface.
4. Familiarity with the characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface.
5. Familiarity with the characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface and how these systems have mutually influential relationships with humans.
6. Knowledge of how economic, political, and social relations among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface.

Early on, the chair of the initiative gave several presentations to faculty within the general education program to illustrate how these geographic learning outcomes could be incorporated into courses.<sup>1</sup> As part of a course proposal process, faculty interested in teaching the third-year interdisciplinary course were asked to identify at least one of the geography standards listed above that their proposed course would incorporate. The third-year course coordinator reviewed course syllabi each semester to ensure that at least one geographic learning goal was present, as well as an assignment in which that goal can be assessed. At the end of each semester, the director of the interdisciplinary general education core asked faculty to provide an account of how they assessed whichever geography outcome(s) they had selected.

### ***Research Methods***

Through an in-depth, multi-method case study, we produce a narrative about the incorporation of geography into an interdisciplinary general education curriculum, thereby raising critical questions and identifying lessons learned about the process (cf. Taylor 2016). As in Korson and Kusek's (2016)

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<sup>1</sup> While the general education program was the center of the geography initiative, the chair also advocated for geography elsewhere in the university. He gave presentations in the schools of nursing and communications to show how geographic perspectives could enrich teaching across the university. He also worked with the library to build geography resources and with the information technology office to expand the availability of Esri's ArcView on campus. An American Association of Geographers (AAG) Visiting Scientist grant was received to fund a workshop on integrating geography—particularly GIS—into classroom instruction. Funding to support quality enhancement initiatives was used to purchase GPS units for classroom use and for geocaching competitions during Geography Awareness Week. For activities related to the latter events, the university received an Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education grant from the AAG.

research comparing approaches to teaching world geography, our goal is less to provide a definitive account of the correct way to proceed and more to provoke thinking and conversation about the possibilities of, in this case, integrating geographic perspectives into general education curricula and of the advocacy of geography in new contexts (see Alderman 2017). We focused our research on the third-year interdisciplinary course, which has been the consistent focal point for the initiative, as well as a course that all undergraduate students were required to take.

During one recent semester—after the quality enhancement plan had been fully implemented—we distributed an online survey to students enrolled in the third-year course and to faculty teaching that course. We distributed the student surveys by email to faculty teaching the course, and faculty distributed the student survey link to students in their courses. Our student survey garnered 43 responses out of 228 enrolled students. We use this student survey data descriptively, as a way to gain insight into student perspectives on the geography initiative in the context of our broader case study methodology. Eight instructors responded to our faculty survey (out of eleven faculty teaching the course that semester). Of the eight respondents, seven were adjunct faculty and one was tenure-track. We also conducted a focus group with four of the faculty and individual interviews with three other faculty who could not participate in the focus group—out of the total of eleven instructors. All of the faculty who participated in the focus group or interviews were adjunct. Our goal with faculty conversations was to collect qualitative data on how geography was integrated into the third-year interdisciplinary course, and the focus group, in particular, was helpful in allowing conversations among participating faculty to develop (cf. Winlow et al. 2013).

We also sought information and perspectives from faculty and administrators involved with the quality enhancement plan process through both informal conversations and email exchanges, which allowed those participants the time and space to construct reflexive accounts of how the geography initiative was pursued (James 2016). The university's Institutional Review Board approved our research plan, and we have taken a number of steps to preserve the confidentiality of research participants, including using pseudonyms selected by participants when quoting faculty directly and omitting certain details, such as specific course titles and the semester in which the research was conducted, that could be used to identify participating faculty. We have also masked the name of the university. Although an interested reader may still be able to surmise the identity of the institution, we took this step to provide an additional layer of protection for the research participants.

Due to a desire to reduce the number of credits required for graduation, the third-year course we examine in this article was eliminated in early 2018. A university committee is in the process of revising the general education curriculum, and it is unclear what role geography education will play. Taking place after we had completed this research, this move further confirms the relative contingency of the inclusion of geography in the curriculum at Southern Regional University. Whatever geography's place may be going forward, we believe that an account of how geography was incorporated into the university's general education curriculum can nevertheless offer important lessons.

## **GEOGRAPHIC PEDAGOGIES IN AN INTERNATIONALIZING CURRICULUM**

In this section, we draw on our interview and survey responses in order to examine how exactly geographic perspectives were incorporated in the classroom. While they share a focus on developing critical academic skills, working in interdisciplinary ways, and engaging transcultural perspectives, the topics of each section vary significantly. Our analysis will show that this variation extends to ways that geography was integrated into courses.

During the focus group, teaching faculty were asked to describe how they incorporated geographic perspectives into their courses. One instructor, James, described integrating geography into his course on South Asian culture and religion this way:

I'm doing just basic geographic things in my class. Like, for example, we are watching a movie... where he kind of explains the starting of human beings in Africa and then going to

India, and then he's showing some of the geography of India and how the civilization grew and things like that. ... Then on my quiz... I give them a blank map, and ask them to write, to point out some of the neighbors of India, and, in the beginning, they are very ignorant about everything. ... What are the neighboring countries of India? They know only the map of America, Canada, and some of the Latin American countries. So this is what I do.

For James, doing “basic geographic things” means introducing students to the histories and geographic contexts of a particular region—in the case of his class, South Asia—including a specific emphasis on being able to locate particular places and countries on a map. He would later respond to a question about how he assesses students’ geographic understanding:

When I start the class, I ask, what is your concept about India? Or Asia? Especially about India. They know India through *Slumdog Millionaire*, and there is nothing else that they know. ... And I explain to them through the map that there are [twenty-nine] states, and each state is different, and kind of slowly building up from that. And I invite people from [a local city] to talk about Kerala, so they get information from somebody who isn't the teacher, and by the end of the semester, I ask them to write an essay about, what was your concept of India, and did this class change your concept of India, or any parts of Asia, and, from the *Slumdog Millionaire*, they really broaden their mind...

Here, James’ narrative situates geographic understanding in terms of his students’ understanding of a particular region, and he notes how he sees changes in students’ understanding over the course of a semester.

Imogen, who teaches a different course exploring aspects of religion and philosophy in India, described the incorporation of geography into a research paper assignment:

The first big step of the research paper is for students to investigate a myth around one of the yoga deities. They can pick a myth about a particular deity, and there's often a specific location with that myth and/or there's an oral tradition where the mythology is set up differently in the south and in the north. And so, then they'll decide, I want to focus on the southern version of this myth because... it links to some idea in the class we talked about or something. And so then when they offer the final paper... they'll include a map of something to do with the myth, either where the myth came from or where the myth occurred. The mountain or the river associated with this or the area where this battle took place or whatever. So at least I know that they know where it came from, right?

Here, in a way not entirely dissimilar to the first example, the geographic component is centered on allowing students to geographically contextualize particular content relevant to the course. Both Imogen and James share an emphasis on mapping that, not problematic in itself, tends to reflect a more constrained understanding of what geography is than what a trained geographer would likely emphasize. Imogen herself notes not being entirely satisfied with this approach and then discussed an additional element that she added to the course:

But then [names geography initiative chair] had better ideas, and he gave me an article that I felt was very readable for my students.... And it has to do with the geography of energy and how different places have different energies. And it asks them to tune into... the subtle energy fields in the places that they go. So the assignment is we read the essay, talk about it, and they chart their own energy for a week or two weeks and notice where they go and what the energy of that space is and what it does to their energy. And then they present that with graphics of their data as well. They have to have some kind of visual presentation of the data.... And there's a reflective section at the end—I like to do that—where, “what did you get out of

this?” And they love seeing the connection between their body, mind, and spirit, but also between them and places, activities, other people.

In this assignment, geography is conceptualized as an awareness of the relationships between individuals and place and the capacity for developing an attentiveness to the sometimes-subtle ways that places can affect the people and activities happening within them.

In an interview, Megan talked about incorporating and assessing geography in her course exploring film and Japanese culture this way:

A lot of what we were doing was talking about “Japanese-ness.” I don’t know if you know, but he [Akira Kurosawa] got a lot of hits about not being Japanese enough or being too Japanese.... So we talked about how that is a culturally and geographically shaped exchange.... There are quizzes and readings tied directly to movies where we talk about representations of the landscape, and how those representations... I don’t make them read it for this class, but I reference an article that is about using films as atlases and the ways that, just as atlases serve multiple purposes, films can serve multiple purposes and provide us with these different exchanges.... Their final has a question about Japanese culture, Japanese-ness, and... the sort of geographical exchange between traditional representations and western representations.

Megan, like most of the instructors we talked to, had little prior formal study in the discipline of geography. Indeed, she said, “I think honestly the last one [geography class taken] was like in high school, and we had to learn the rivers of the world.” Nevertheless, her own research and writing have led her to an interest in humanistic geography, and the interview contained mentions of several scholars who would likely be familiar to geographers including Tim Cresswell and Edward Casey. This prior exposure to geographical frameworks is discernable in her narrative, even if she worries that she may not always be “doing enough to meet this imaginary standard of how much is enough” in terms of incorporating geography into her teaching, which is an understandable concern given that improving students’ understanding of geography is only one among a number of other goals required of the third-year interdisciplinary course.

Another instructor, Matthew, who completed a PhD in geography while teaching in the program, discussed how geographic perspectives inform his course exploring urban life from a transnational perspective:

For me, the geographic aspect of that is sort of twofold—thinking about spaces of the city itself, how people navigate those spaces, how being in one part of the city situates you in a different way than if you were living in another part of the city. Like that kind of geographic question, but also the question of connections or relations across cities and across places. Questions around globalization, trade, cultural flows: All these things are sort of linking the different cities we’re thinking about. So, I’m trying to get students to think about how these different connections emerge, so that’s kind of what it meant in my class.

When asked to clarify what that meant in more practical terms, Matthew describes an essay assignment requiring the use of “critical geographic ideas and concepts”:

I had them write an essay—we read this book called *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, and I gave them a series of prompts, all of which got at some of those different geographic angles I was talking about, either about the spaces of the city or Mumbai’s connection to the rest of the world. The book does such a nice job of getting at both of those, so basically, they’re just applying some critical geographic ideas and concepts that we had already talked about and trying to use those to make sense of what the author is talking about in the book.



In these discussions from faculty, one can see a tension between an understanding of geography as a kind of in depth knowledge about the characteristics of particular places and an understanding of geography as a set of conceptual or disciplinary ways of knowing about the world.

These different kinds of understanding of geography also carry over into student responses on our survey. In one of the open-ended questions, students were asked to describe “an example of the way that geographic knowledge or perspectives were incorporated into your [third-year interdisciplinary] course.” We have provided a sample of those responses, selected to represent the range of student comments, in Table 2. In general, their answers lined up with the diversity encountered in instructors’ accounts, including being required to “use maps and describe them,” talking “about different countries and their life,” attending to the geographic context of the course material, or identifying particular geographic concepts like socio-spatial processes and uneven development.

The existence of a variety of understandings of what geography is and what it might mean to incorporate geography into a course is not necessarily problematic in itself, nor is it particularly surprising given the diversity of understandings that exist within and beyond the discipline. However, a focus on geographic concepts and frameworks highlights geography’s unique contribution, while those approaches that understand geography as an in-depth understanding of particular places (far from specific to geography) or as reducible to “finding things on a map” can risk downplaying the discipline’s substantive and specific intellectual contributions to understanding an interconnected and uneven world. Indeed, some of these approaches risk leaving students with a quite limited understanding of what geography can be.<sup>2</sup>

This also raises questions about the kinds of support that were offered to faculty being asked to incorporate geography into their courses. On the faculty survey, we asked respondents to rate the extent to which they “feel supported to successfully implement geographic learning outcomes in your [third-year interdisciplinary] course” on a 1-to-5 scale from not at all supported (1) to very supported (5). The mean response was 3.68, with two faculty indicating that they felt very supported, three responding that they felt supported, one answering that he or she felt somewhat supported, and two indicating that they felt only minimally supported. This variation also showed up in our qualitative conversations. Imogen, who had already noted support from the geography initiative chair, also discussed a presentation given by the chair at an annual interdisciplinary general education program workshop:

His presentation was quite gripping to me because he had a video presentation with websites that would show a lot of data in different ways, including on a map, and he would show you, I don’t know, questions that I hadn’t thought to ask... like showing literacy across the city or something. So, social questions that could be mapped.

While concerns about the reduction of geography to questions of mapping are important, this does suggest that, at least for Imogen, the workshop presentation was productive in terms of broadening her understanding of what it could mean to incorporate geography. On the other hand, Megan offered a counterpoint:

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, instructors were required to incorporate specific geographic learning outcomes in their syllabi, but the frequency and extent to which course materials, activities, and assignments addressing those outcomes were flagged as “geography” varied. It is clear that some students did not realize their instructors were attempting to incorporate geography into their course. When students were asked, “To what degree were you aware that [Southern Regional] University had undertaken an effort to improve students’ understanding of geography?,” the mean response, on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being *not at all aware* and 5 being *very aware*, was 2.43 (median of 2). While our interest in questions around the advocacy of geography are part of what lead us to this concern, we should also note that students’ impression of what geography is may have limited bearing on whether or not they make progress toward being able to think geographically.

I don't feel like I had many resources offered to me. Like I feel like the way it's set up now, if you're going to teach this class, you should know how to do it, or maybe you shouldn't suggest a 200 or 300 level, and you should make it a 100 rather than... I mean, it would be nice, I guess, if there was some sort of talk at the [annual] workshop... if they would say, "What does geography mean to the... program?"

Megan's response indicates some problems, including the fact that annual faculty workshops, have, in the years since the start of the geography initiative, not always featured geography. Given the turnover in adjunct faculty, some faculty will have not participated in them. This leaves the support dependent on one-on-one relationships between faculty and the geography initiative chair, which, given competing priorities and time constraints, may be limited in the absence of perceived problems on the part of the faculty or the coordinator.

## **ASSESSMENT, EXPERTISE, AND CONTINGENCY**

Institutional efforts to assess the geography initiative were inconsistent. There were initially efforts to assess changes in students' understanding of geography, including the addition of a series of geography questions to a standardized learning assessment given to one hundred students in their first and final years. This assessment showed relatively small increases between student scores on the geography questions between first and final years, and it was only administered twice (the 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 academic years) due to concerns that the instrument did not align with what was actually being taught. Within the interdisciplinary program itself, there was an effort to give students in each course a pre- and post-geography quiz, but this was abandoned in favor of assessments individualized for each particular course. As one administrative faculty put it in an email exchange with us:

Due to the diverse range of topics... designing an overall assessment instrument that could be used to determine student achievement of the geography outcome across all sections proved problematic, and, in the end, instructors were asked to assess student learning appropriate to the course, resulting in assessment data that [were] unique to each course.

Our discussions with faculty confirm a range of different assessment strategies that largely reflect the different understandings of geography outlined earlier. Here, Matthew offers an explanation that centers on the use of particular geographic concepts, while James emphasizes in-depth regional knowledge and the ability to identify places on map:

Matthew: I think, for me, it was in the essays they write, if I could see these geographic concepts, like, say, sociospatial process or uneven development. If I see them using that, and it making sense, and it being insightful, then I feel like that's good, that's what needed to happen. For me, whether those ideas and concepts are used at all and, if they're used, if it's a correct use and an insightful use of those ideas, I think.

James: They have to define questions. [Ten] questions [per student]... I have 26 students, so 260 questions. ... I also give them blank map, and I may ask them to identify states and the neighboring countries. So they have to study 250 questions and answers, so they get a wider ... broaden their mind. So for the evaluation, I get a sense of really that they know India and some of the neighboring countries in Asia.

The very different kinds of assessments used in each course limit our ability to provide something like a standardized assessment of the impact of incorporating geography. This was broadly recognized as a problem by those involved. Indeed, an administrative faculty member central to implementation of the geography initiative discussed one of the weaknesses of the program as "not having a coherent

assessment strategy.” He attributed the difficulties in developing a standardized assessment with the diversity of ways that geographic perspectives and knowledges were integrated into each section. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to imagine that more standardized and consistent measures would have resolved all the issues. To even begin to develop those measures would necessitate something like a shared understanding, among the faculty and administrators involved, of what geography is and what was to be achieved by incorporating it into the general education curriculum. We saw relatively little evidence of such a shared understanding. Instead, a shared goal—improving students’ understanding of geography—was pursued with a range of different understandings of what geography is. Some of these understandings, in closer alignment with academic geography, emphasized theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools for approaching the world. Others, more closely aligned with more popular understandings, approached geography as a set of content knowledges about the world, emphasizing either questions of location and mapping or in-depth knowledge of particular places.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these two understandings can be difficult to disentangle in practice, and, while we have expressed a preference for the former, there obviously remains much that students can gain from the latter. In this context, it is not hard to understand why faculty and administrators decided to use assessments tailored to each course. Even in the context of departments with fulltime, tenure-track faculty pursuing pedagogical goals strictly in line with their disciplinary expertise, designing meaningful assessments across multiple and topically diverse sections of a course would require collaboration to arrive at a shared sense of the goals and how they could be assessed. Anything else risks a situation where goals and assessments are simply imposed on faculty from above. At a minimum, this would restrict the freedom of faculty to develop and teach the best version of their course, and it may also result in a less-than-enthusiastic pursuit of those goals among faculty. Those inherent challenges are exacerbated here by the lack of disciplinary expertise in geography at the university.

When asked to evaluate the success of the initiative, Imogen raised some important questions about the expertise in geography needed to evaluate student learning and the impact of the initiative more broadly:

I don’t even know if I’m qualified to answer that because I have so little experience in geography.... So it creates more empathy for me, with professors from different disciplines when we say, “now you have to teach writing,” right? I’m a writer. I’m an English professor. It doesn’t faze me. I know that I can meet anybody where they are and advance their writing, in a number of ways. In terms of their geography, how would I know? I abstain. I respectfully abstain from the question. I don’t even know.

Imogen’s response highlights the central importance of disciplinary expertise and points to the difficulties of seeking to incorporate geography in the absence of fulltime teaching faculty in geography.

Even beyond the question of expertise itself, the program’s dependence on a contingent model of faculty employment also presents difficulties. On the one hand, as an administrative faculty member put it in an email exchange, the interdisciplinary general education sequence was seen as an ideal context in which to incorporate geography because “as a program outside the traditional academic infrastructure (discipline-based departments) that serves all undergraduate students, it was not constrained by typical departmental politics and had the flexibility to add a geography requirement... relatively easily.” On the other hand, that same administrator would go on to name the “heavy reliance on contingent faculty who (a) were not trained in teaching geography, (b) came and went from the

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<sup>3</sup> This was certainly the case in the classroom, as we have shown, and it would be improbable to imagine that those different understandings did not also extend to the non-geographer faculty and administrators whose input shaped the quality enhancement plan, although our limited access to some of the individuals involved with the drafting of the plan limits what we can say about that here. Indeed, the diversity of meanings that people attach to geography could partially account for the support that the idea of improving students’ understanding of geography received from faculty.

program, and (c) were not always motivated to include geography despite it being mandated” as one of the weaknesses of the initiative.

We share a sense that the contingency of faculty involved in implementing this initiative in the classroom is an important issue. However, we emphasize that the problem is not located with individual adjunct faculty who are committed and skilled teachers, but rather with a division of labor that differentially distributes compensation, security, and status within the university. For an initiative relying on contingent faculty, this creates problems with the perceived legitimacy and significance of the efforts among the rest of the faculty. It also raises questions about the buy-in of contingent faculty themselves who, in contrast with tenure-line faculty, do not play the same kind of role in the kinds of governance processes that produced the quality enhancement plan. The important practical matters of professional development, assessment, and governance that would be necessary for the successful implementation of an initiative like this require work beyond the actual teaching of courses for which contingent faculty are not generally compensated. More broadly, to the extent that the initiative was hampered by unclear goals and inconsistent assessment strategies, the contingency of the faculty involved made addressing these problems more difficult.

## LESSONS LEARNED

We imagine at least two sets of readers who may learn something from our case study. One set would be those who may find themselves considering pursuing a similar kind of curricular initiative. The second are those interested in advocating for geography in undergraduate education. We begin to conclude by outlining what we see as some of the key practical lessons learned from our research.

*Valuing disciplinary expertise.* The fact that this university does not have a geography PhD among its regular teaching faculty hampered the initiative in significant ways. We have shown how an absence of disciplinary expertise limited the geography teaching that was done as well as constrained efforts to assess student learning. While we recognize the financial pressures to hire faculty who can “cover” more than one area and acknowledge that the anthropologist hired has been an important advocate for geography at the university, not hiring a geography PhD to support what was a relatively ambitious effort to integrate geography into the university’s general education program seems like a missed opportunity.

Of course, in a world of unlimited resources, we could simply recommend that an institution interested in improving their students’ understanding of geography open a geography department staffed by multiple tenure-line geographers. As one contingent faculty member mentioned during the focus group, “I really like for things to be ... multidisciplinary in a sense but ... I mean if you want that requirement, let’s do it. But [Southern Regional University] likes to do things on the cheap.” Even in the context of limited resources and competing priorities, we think a case can be made for the value of more investment in geography. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this may not be feasible in many cases—nor particularly likely in the absence of an already established constituency to advocate for it. We suggest that this represents an opportunity for disciplinary associations, like the American Association of Geographers (AAG), to step in to further nurture existing and potential interest in geography at universities without geography departments. To be sure, there are already efforts that may contribute along these lines, including its Visiting Geographical Scientist Program, Speakers Bureau, and the Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education program, as well as the association’s work to build connections with minority-serving institutions like Tribal Colleges and Universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. However, there remains room for the AAG to take on a more proactive role in working with universities that might be interested in integrating geography in their general education curricula. Of course, this interest would be more likely to come to the attention of the AAG in the context of universities where there are already geographers present, but there may also be opportunities to constructively engage with the networks of organizations that promote general education and the liberal arts, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, to make a broader case for the value of geography.

*Combatting contingency.* Even aside from the question of disciplinary expertise per se, the initiative would have benefitted from more dedicated staffing. To be sure, the chair of the geography initiative took on a significant amount of work, in addition to a heavy teaching load, developing study-abroad courses, coordinating the anthropology minor, and performing a range of other scholarly and administrative work. In the context of that kind of workload, the amount of time that could be dedicated to the initiative was necessarily contingent on these competing demands. A similar point could be made about the third-year course in which geographic learning goals were to be incorporated. This course was already the site of a number of key learning objectives, such as research, writing, critical analysis, and transcultural understanding—and the addition of geography to these other objectives, however complementary, could only go so far in the timeline of a single semester.

Perhaps most centrally, the contingent model of faculty employment presented obstacles to the success of the initiative, even as it is part of what allowed for the flexibility to add in geography in the way that was done. This flexibility can cut both ways though, as we see in the recent decision to cut the second- and third-year interdisciplinary courses from the curriculum in the interest of reducing the number of credits required for graduation. If contingent faculty are expected to play vital roles in meeting educational objectives, they should be involved in the processes through which those objectives are developed, implemented, and assessed. At the very least, this requires providing additional compensation for program governance, teaching collaboration, and professional development. Moreover, as their contingent status itself is an obstacle that affects both faculty and students, institutions ought to pursue opportunities to move away from contingent employment models.

*Incorporating geographic education research.* The lack of consistent assessment practices was broadly acknowledged to be a problem with the initiative, and we pointed to how the relative absence of geographic expertise contributed to the issue. Nevertheless, there is significant research in geographic education and pedagogy that could be used to conceptualize and evaluate student learning in geography. One particularly promising avenue is the recent work on “geocapabilities” that focuses attention on the capacities that are nurtured in geographic learning (Lambert, Solem, and Tani 2015). Walkington et al. (2018) have highlighted the potential of this approach in higher education, and their focus on geography’s contribution to personal development, lifelong learning, and informed citizenship dovetails well with a liberal arts approach to higher education. While not a substitute for employing faculty with disciplinary expertise, a multidisciplinary faculty could engage with these and other literatures in ways that could lead to deeper learning and support for faculty who are charged with teaching geographic perspectives in their courses.

## CONCLUSION

This article reflects on the efforts of a relatively small liberal arts university without a geography department to bolster the geographic understanding of its students as one component of a larger initiative to internationalize the campus. Of course, calls for improving geographic literacy can be amenable to a range of agendas (cf. Alderman 2017; Morin 2013), and agendas of internationalization and global education can themselves work to occlude the more immediate systems of inequality in which universities are embedded (Dimpfl and Smith 2018). Nevertheless, we do see geography, taught critically, offering students powerful frameworks for understanding and engaging a plural and uneven world. Even as we identify shortcomings with the initiative and note the uncertainty of its future as the general education curriculum is reformed at the university, we continue to think that incorporating geography offers an opportunity for Southern Regional University and other universities like it to fulfill their mission to prepare students for life, work, and informed citizenship.

From the perspective of geography as a discipline, our case indicates that there could be important opportunities for the advancement of geography and for the broader take-up of geographic perspectives for making sense of an unequal and interconnected world. While there has been significant research on the experiences of “stand-alone” geographers working outside traditional geography

departments (Carter and Housel 2013), this research suggests the value of exploring the prospects for geography in institutions without even a stand-alone geographer or where geographers are included only on a contingent basis—while it also points to the problems posed by contingent models of faculty employment. In addition to internationalization, toward which we believe many geographers are already quite attuned, further critical engagement with general education curricula and accreditation processes may also offer the chance to incorporate more geographic perspectives into students' experiences. This, we suggest, would be positive for the discipline and for the students we educate.

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**Table 1.** Representative student responses to the prompt: “Can you describe an example of a way that geographic knowledge or perspectives was incorporated into your [3<sup>rd</sup> year interdisciplinary] course?”

We had to use maps and describe them in an oral presentation over our specified topics
We discuss how space affects people
When we were talking about cities in the global south and how they are affected by things in the global north.
migration of the Dravidian's into the Indus valley. We also had a map quiz over India and surrounding areas
None
Talking about how Kurosawa shows historical Japan as geographically different than modern Japan.
The majority of the class centered around socio-spatial processes through readings and subsequent class discussions.
There were many times when this was included. One example was a Geography paper we had to write comparing Hindu/Indian Geography and Yoga philosophies to our own. We also analyzed how these impacted our everyday lives.
urbanization, globalization, modernization, uneven development
We talked about different countries and their life.

**Table 2:** Integrating geography into the university's general education curriculum

<b>Key steps</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Responsible parties</b>
Development of quality enhancement plan including goal to improve students understanding of geography by integrating geography into the university's general education curriculum.	2006-2008	Quality Enhancement Plan preparation committee, Academic administration, with broad involvement from faculty and staff
Hiring a tenure-track professor in anthropology/human geography (who will become the chair of the geography initiative and coordinator for the 3 <sup>rd</sup> year interdisciplinary general education course)	2008	College of Arts and Sciences, Sociology Program
Began regularly offering Introduction to Human Geography as an option to fulfil a social science requirement	2008 (and continues to be offered)	Geography Initiative Chair, General Education Sub-committee
Decision to target the interdisciplinary course sequence as the place to integrate geography, and selection of learning outcomes.	2008-2009	Quality enhancement plan implementation committee and Geography Initiative Chair
Piloting 3 <sup>rd</sup> year interdisciplinary courses including geographic learning outcomes and presentations to	2009-2010	Faculty volunteers, Geography Initiative Chair, Interdisciplinary General Education Program Director
All 3 <sup>rd</sup> year interdisciplinary courses include geographic learning outcomes. Some 2 <sup>nd</sup> year interdisciplinary courses also integrate geographic learning outcomes.	2010-2018	Faculty teaching courses and Geography Initiative Chair
Development of geographic resources for teaching and learning	2008-2013	Geography Initiative Chair, with Library and Information Technology office.
Broader advocacy of geography across the campus, including presentations to faculty, GIS workshop, and geography awareness week activities	2008-2013	Geography Initiative Chair