

Editorial Preface

Commentary: Reflections on Leadership (or Lack Thereof) From the Ground Up

Donald P. Albert, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, USA

INTRODUCTION

There are opportunities for geographers to rise into administrative and leadership positions. These might be positions such as program coordinators, chairs, deans, editor-in-chiefs, executive directors, or other such postings. These opportunities ought to be accepted with a service mindset akin to the Walmart slogan, “How may I help you?” The oft-heard cliché, “The best leaders are the ones who don’t ask for the job” has been more true than false from personal experience. Too often leadership positions are filled with the least inspiring individuals fulfilling delusions of grandeur while hoping to ingratiate themselves with other administrators at the next (higher) rung of the organizational hierarchy. This fosters a “them” versus “us” atmosphere that stifles cooperation and productivity while reducing employee satisfaction. Excellent leaders delight in the accomplishments of those under their charge. In the end, successful individuals translate into flourishing programs, departments, colleges, journals, or organizations. Let me encourage those selfless individuals that are creative, dynamic, and passionate to migrate into the leadership vacuum generated by deposed, retired, and otherwise removed lieutenants of academia. While the field of applied geography is, and has been, blessed with exceptional leaders, opportunities remain to reestablish stability on occasion. We must not settle for poor leaders because there are “no other alternatives,” but demand selfless, intelligent, and visionary leaders to champion our efforts.

The following collection of essays consists of largely reprinted prefaces from the *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*. What I have done is to sequence these, and in some cases added opinions on leadership. This I know is most indulgent; nevertheless, I hope that some find these ramblings worthwhile.

While I have never been an administrator, I have risen through the academic ranks in short order from assistant, associate, and full professor. Many never make it all the way up the faculty rank, perhaps, to them, what they do is just a job. I refer to such individuals as minimalists. While some say, hey if they are satisfied being a lifetime associate professor that is their choice. Frankly, I do not agree, and am not interested in voting “yes” on tenure for such individuals. However, the problem is that minimalists do not show their faces until after tenure and promotion to associate professor. By then, it is too late, and departments are stuck with faculty members doing as little as possible.

I have had the opportunity to experience wonderful leaders and the worst dreadful individuals one could image. So, on the receiving side of leadership I can speak with great authority as an undergraduate student, graduate student, visiting assistant professor, research fellow, and as an assistant, associate, and full professor over seven or eight institutions and over four decades. On the sending side, I have had three major opportunities to demonstrate leadership, two were at the discipline level and one at

the university level. I am the founder and current co-editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, and I was recently the local host of a regional meeting of the American Association of Geographers, this event was well received, and a tremendous success. I am currently a faculty senator, but not sure if I am having an impact as our faculty senate operators on an advisory level only. While, I am not sure I could write a book on becoming a good leadership, I most certainly could write one on poor leadership. I have compiled a “don’t list” for administrators that I have chosen not to include here because frankly, it is unbelievable that individuals exhibiting such poor behaviors are embraced by some institutions. Therefore, the following essay follows the hierarchy of the academic ladder from administrators, faculty, graduate students, to undergraduate students, and concludes with a thank you to those leaders that helped inspire me along the way. On reading this essay, a colleague noted that this piece was very personal and narrow. My response was yes, it is, and thanks (with no sarcasm).

ADMINISTRATORS

While I do not have much experience as a *de jure* leader, I would like to think that I have had a positive impact behind the scenes in departmental and university affairs. Being editor-in-chief of this journal has offered me an opportunity to direct something, but still it is not quite akin to running an organization with all the personnel “issues” that divert administrators. So, while it might be indulgent of me, please permit me to share a few thoughts on management.

In my opinion, administrators sometimes engage in tactics that I view as counterproductive. For those higher up the chain, there seems to be overt tendencies to foster directives, policies, and goals that are more about generating legacies than other more basic concerns. Such administrators are gambling their entities’ literal and figurative foundations and should check themselves with voices from “below.” Those leaders failing to consider the advice of their constituents remind me of the well-known children’s tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” by Hans Christian Anderson. The moral here is that dissenting opinions are valuable, and such views should at least be entertained before making final decisions. Open dialogue, up and down the chain of command, leads to a more transparent and honest administration. Just as manuscripts improve through a peer-reviewed interchange between authors, reviewers, and editors, institutional decision-making benefits from top-down and bottom-up interactions where both sides are listening. My advice to administrators is that rather than reenacting the “The Emperor’s New Clothes” let me suggest another script to emulate – “The Emperor’s New Groove.”

FACULTY

For those of us who claim to be professors of geography it is essential to embrace research and publication. While each of us has unique talents, qualifications, and experiences with some excelling more or less on teaching, service, or research, as professionals we should not ignore our weakest link. For myself, I hesitate to call what I do “research,” nevertheless, I have been able to pursue various, and albeit esoteric, writing projects. It has been a great thrill for me to be able to come up with creative ideas and follow these through, notwithstanding the hard work and perseverance required to develop a manuscript and have it published in a *bona fide* peer-reviewed journal. For those not engaged in this process, it is hard to convey the amount of time, effort, and diligence involved to get something in print. In my opinion, any self-respecting professor should be involved in research and publication at some level — even those with administrative or other duties that pull them away from scholarly pursuits. I have encountered “professors” that become sensitive when chatting about publication requirements and expectations; others openly, often, and quite emphatically mention that research is just not their “cup of tea.” Such professors, especially the latter, have more in common with high school teachers (not to disparage high school teachers who do not have publication requirements)

than their colleagues in academia. Unbelievably, there are associate deans with less than a couple of low-level publications over a twenty plus year career. Maintaining an involvement in research allows us to remain current and sensitive to the nuances and changes in our field(s) of expertise. This is in essence the bar for post-tenure evaluations; however, some have managed one way or another to circumvent this five-year review. Seeing one's article in print is exciting — at least it is still for me after more than twenty years as an author. I have over the years equated having an article published analogous to a songwriter, singer or musical group getting a hit song on the radio. Even if you do not become a super star with an article making geography's "top forty," at least you have made the stage. So let me encourage all professors to remain or become engaged, and to join the club, band, or stage for a memorable concert.

Don't Use but Promote Each Other

When new faculty arrive, I certainly am optimistic. I have mentored incoming faculty informally at the department level and formally at the university level. Irrespective of whether a faculty member is newly arrived or has been around for decades, I encourage all my colleagues to become engaged in some form of scholarly activity. I have been somewhat disappointed at times and feel that perhaps I have been used a bit. On the other side, I have had good results too. One colleague publicly credits me with his scholarly rival after decades of focusing on teaching and administration. He is still going strong. However, there is a fine line between helping someone achieve success and allowing that person to demonstrate competency in their respective fields. Is it worth being helpful? I am not sure any more. We should not use each other for personal gain, or just until tenure, but altruistically support and promote each other. I will probably take a step back in the future with new hires, and while I will be helpful, I will be cautious about helping too much.

Mixing Business With Pleasure

The Australian adventurer and producer of travel films and television documentaries Alby Mangels is known for encouraging his audience to explore the world. "Have you ever had a dream? Just pack up and go? I did.... I'm Alby Mangels." As geographers, many of us are more predisposed to follow his call to travel. While we may not be able to drop everything like Alby, we can explore the world beyond our local community between semesters, especially those of us with long semester breaks. In the United States this can encompass most of May, all of June and July, and most of August, a span of about 100 days. While there are family and other responsibilities to consider, plus the expense of travelling to overcome, the rewards of visiting different places and regions is well worth all the planning involved. Over the last six years, I have had the opportunity to spend about one month outside of the United States each year. I have visited Belize, Spain, Turkey, Australia, and Singapore; the last three countries coincided with scheduled geography conferences. This has helped me network face-to-face with geographers and organizations from other countries while offering me an international platform. These trips presented me more credibility teaching world regional geography both in the face-to-face and online courses. I have found that when using photographs or sharing anecdotal personal experiences from these excursions students were more attentive and inclined to engage. These trips have allowed me to cross the International Date Line, go "Down Under" to see the Great Barrier Reef, experience Uluru, and visit numerous other unique locations. So, in geography, "Mixing business with pleasure" is appropriate. Follow your dreams!

After Climbing the Academic Ranks

How does one maintain an appropriate amount of motivation after tenure, promotion, and perhaps an award or two have come and gone? Navigating through these stages is a testament of one's success in the triangle of teaching, research and service.¹ So what's next? Well, in those universities that base financial remuneration on "merit" one must continue to engage or salaries in effect dwindle with annual increases in insurance premiums and other payroll deductions. If that does not spur one on,

salary compression will reduce one’s compensation relative to recently minted PhDs that often are enticed with competitive offers.

How does one avoid “burning out” and succumbing to academic fatigue? If the reader will indulge me for a moment or two, here are three suggestions from personal experience. First, find a fresh topic or activity that is invigorating. For me, establishing IJAGR and becoming its editor-in-chief fulfilled a professional aspiration (Albert, 2014). Two other colleagues similarly redirected their activities, one shifted focus from urban poverty to cultural geography with emphasis on the pedagogy of place, and the other to historical-geographical investigations of the “Sabine River-Caddo Lake border area of Texas and adjacent Louisiana”—both to great acclaim (Figure 1).

Second, mix business with pleasure. That is, combine travel to explore world regions and places international conferences. I have combined one-month visits to Turkey (2014), Australia (2015), and Singapore (2016) in conjunction with presentations at international conferences, respectively; these included the Turkish Association of Geographers, Institute of Australian Geographers, and the International Geographical Union Commission on Geography Education. Since I also teach World Regional Geography these trips have the benefit of enhancing the credibility of classroom lectures. This strategy is fantastic for developing contacts and building networks while also taking in the “sights” (Figure 2).

And third, mentoring junior faculty and encouraging senior colleagues can be rewarding and beneficial for the department. Interacting with untenured members should be altruistic with no personal gains anticipated. Simple things such as commenting on manuscripts, encouraging conference attendance, and recommending potential publication outlets, especially journals and magazines

Figure 1. (Left) Dr. Jim Tiller with Don Albert at the Southwest Division of the American Association of Geographers, October 26, 2017, Huntsville, Texas. (Right) Dr. John Strait at same conference presenting on the geography of the blues. Both Jim Tiller and John Strait are full professors and still passionate about their respective research themes. Their enthusiasm and willingness to pitch in make them fantastic colleagues.

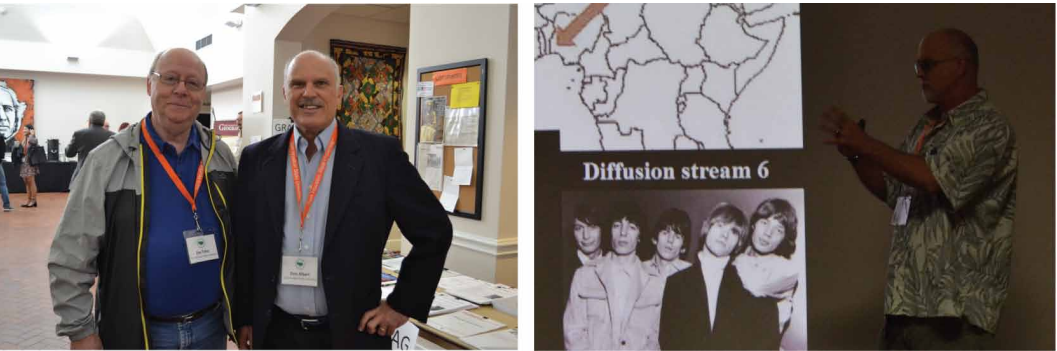


Figure 2. From left to right: Blue Mosque (Istanbul), Great Barrier Reef (offshore northeastern Australia), and Singapore River (Singapore). These places were visited in conjunction with international conferences.



from state and regional organizations that might be unknown to those incoming faculty hired from outside the region. While listening to their concerns, it is important to maintain trust to ensure that information divulged is not dispersed through the infamous “grapevine” without their permission. Congratulate colleagues on accepted manuscripts, conference participation, grant awards, and other endeavors, as individual achievements are departmental triumphs too. So, there are countless other avenues to success after tenure and promotion, these three activities have allowed me to maintain a professional edge after climbing the ranks.

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Help Students Find Graduate Programs

Here in the Department of Geography and Geology at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, our Geography Program has an applied focus with emphasis on geographic information science and technology (GIS&T). Our curriculum offers systematic, regional, and geospatial courses that provide our students with a solid and competitive background to pursue a career or continue on to graduate school. While some of our students move directly to our own graduate program offering a Master of Science (MS) degree and a Certificate in Applied GIS, others seek advanced degrees elsewhere. Those students that venture off to other institutions to obtain graduate degrees help increase our visibility and improve our chances of placing future students. So, in recent years our students have been selected for graduate assistantships at Michigan State University, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Texas State University, The University of North Texas, Texas A & M University - College Station, Northeastern University, and the University of South Carolina. While administrators often request “assessment data” showing pre- and post-course or program results, an enlighten evaluator might rather track a department’s record of placing students into graduate programs or employment; however, I digress here on a topic for another time. So, getting back to the point of this preface, I appreciate the support our students have received from geography graduate programs in and out of the region. Thanks!

Reflections and Strategies for Graduate Students

Students enrolled in Masters of Science in Applied Geographic Information Sciences and similarly named degree programs are often career orientated. Those employed in industries that utilize geospatial technologies hope to increase their academic and technical credentials to enhance advancement opportunities inside or outside their current place of employment; whereas, other students have little “real world” employment experience—at least pertaining to geospatial technologies. Some of the students are attending full time while others are remaining employed, so their time is precious and devoting extra hours to studies is difficult. Students already employed or with limited financial resources favor programs within reasonable proximity of domicile or employment. For example, if students would prefer to attend program X, but must attend program Y because of distance constraints, then a program could accumulate students without the excitement to excel. Such students often select those courses offered on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to minimize miles, time, and cost constraints or alternately, enrolling in evening or online courses so as to maintain regular hours on the job. Both these options can test students’ stamina and commitment to completing the program. Herein are some personal opinions that might help potential and existing students get the most out of their graduate experience.

Here are some reflections to consider if enrolled or enrolling in a graduate program specializing in applied geographic information science. Realize that geographers investigate at the intersection of content knowledge, spatial perspective, and geographic (geospatial) skills. One should not focus just on geospatial skills—that is just learning geospatial software, but also develop a subject knowledge base, whether it is urban planning, forestry, environmental geography or some other systematic field,

and possess a sound understanding of geographic perspectives (distance decay, central place theory, modifiable areal unit problem, spatial autocorrelation, etc.). Remember that applied geography is an approach to analysis that helps decisions-makers identify solutions to problems. In this day-and-age, using geospatial technologies is a necessity because of the enormous data required to capture and analyze the real world in an electronic environment. Focusing on software and technology training alone does not qualify one to manage and analyze complex geographic questions. For example, someone using ground-penetrating radar (GPR) is not necessarily conducting geographic research—geography involves distribution, patterns, connections, and interactions between people and environment. While it is important to distinguish oneself with a focus, do not be too narrow in interest as most industries (petroleum) have an ebb and flow. Read across a range of topics in journals such as this one (Albert, 2014), *Applied Geography* and *Papers in Applied Geography*, and other geography or related journals. Read peer-reviewed articles on a daily basis even if not assigned—mark up these papers with questions and comments. After reading the body of the text, examine the references and search for other potential reads. Note the different citation styles between journals and mimic the number, quality, and meticulous formatting of citations in your own research papers. Graduate students should attend or participate in regional and national conferences to explore current themes and network with students and faculty in their field of interest. It is important that graduate students demonstrate an increasing independence with course and project assignments. Let me suggest that first semester graduate students enroll in a research methods course; one student of late conveyed to me that just such a course was a real “eye opener.” Finally, do not be arrogant, and this applies to professors as well. Knowing that you do not know is a sign of intelligence, so ask questions, dig for answers, take advice, and forge ahead.

On another front, let me encourage prospective graduate students to get a face-to-face degree rather than an online one. I cannot image this trend in online degrees is good. It creates a viscous cycle when administrators coerce programs to go online, which is great for faculty who want to “work” from home, and for students who do not want to go to “school.” In my opinion, the propensity of online degrees is financially driven and perpetuates mediocracy. However, I am afraid that market forces will continue to spur this form of instruction. This has real implications for the applied geospatial job market with perspective employees or those newly hired who do not have the personal and hands-on-training one ought to have with an advanced degree.

INVOLVE UNDERGRADUATES

Undergraduate students can contribute much to a geography program. Their excitement and willingness to participate is wonderful to experience. Our department successfully uses undergraduates to staff weather and climate labs. Becoming a lab assistant involves a competitive interview process, and if selected, students attend weekly training sessions conducted by our lab coordinator. The lab assistants are provided office space, hold office hours, and maintain grades. This professional experience has proved invaluable for those applying for graduate program. As mentioned, we have had great success with directing quality students toward graduate programs. Another way to involve students is to engage the geography club. We have had our club promote geography on campus, announce club meetings in class, and participate in geography conferences. Recently, our lab assistants and geography club members staffed the registration desk at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Southwest Division of the American Association of Geographers in Huntsville, Texas (Figure 3). While faculty structured and organized the conference, our undergraduates ran the entire event and did a fabulous job. It is a great way to involve undergraduates and promotes a working-together mentality that helps break the ice between faculty and students. Further, our students had an opportunity to meet Derek Alderman, the president of the AAG, and other geography faculty and graduate students from the southwest. The president of the geography club had an opportunity to welcome the participants at one of our luncheons. This is no doubt a wonderful experience for all!

Figure 3. Undergraduate geography majors staffing registration tables. One is selling conference T-shirts (left) the other (right) handing out registration materials during the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers, Huntsville, Texas (Middle).



“THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES”

With just a handful of prefaces to write before I hand over the reins of IJAGR, I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to four individuals that were supportive on my journey through academia. While dozens, including members of IJAGR’s editorial review board, have brought a sparkle to this career, name-dropping would invariably leave off significant contributors. Rather, I would like to make a brief mention of four individuals that have had an important role in the early years of my education and career. I will begin with my undergraduate degree and proceed chronologically. The first individual that encouraged me was Albert M. Tosches, professor of geography at Salem State College (now University) which is located in historic Salem, Massachusetts. During the period I was a student, Professor Tosches was a geography advisor. It was in this capacity that he recognized that I had overcome some of the early difficulties with college (during my first two years my grades were all over the place, after completing four years in the United State Air Force I returned to accumulate a long list of consecutive “A’s”). Professor Tosches is one of the first persons that I felt saw some potential in me, and I appreciate this encouragement to this day. I still remember that Professor Tosches was interested in Albania and political geography. From Massachusetts, I headed to Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, where I enrolled in a master’s program geography. Here I met Neal Lineback and became the first cartographer for his long running series “Geography in the News.” Professor Lineback is a down-to-earth person; I still remember the tomato sandwich he offered me some thirty years ago, a small but thoughtful gesture towards a hungry graduate student. Over the years, Neal has given me solid advice concerning career and personal matters. We remain in contact with occasional emails, phone conversations, and even visits now and again. From Boone, I eventually made it to Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina. I had the good chance and privilege to work with Wilbert “Wil” Gesler. Dr. Gesler is an internationally renowned medical geography now retired and living in England. Aside from his three masters (mathematics, literature, and geography) and a doctorate in geography, what most impressed me about Dr. Gesler was his humble and modest nature. I felt honored that someone with his stature would take the time to chair my dissertation committee and mentor me through graduate school. That he was willing to take on someone with so much to learn is a credit to his patience and concern for others. Finally, I want to thank Allen Williams, who “hired” me for my first tenure-track position in the Department of Geography and Geology at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Williams is a straightforward no-nonsense person who felt that my broad interest across geography would be beneficial to the Geography Program. I learned from Dr. Williams to be happy for the successes of others. He made a point to congratulate me on each achievement - small or large; after all, personal achievements contribute to a department’s success. Tosches, Lineback, Gesler, and Williams have had a huge impact on my personal and academic journey. I appreciate their efforts to help me fulfill my dreams of becoming a geographer. Each of us could tell similar stories of inspiring individuals that have helped us along the way. Thanks to all those that have guided us along the way. Now it is our turn.

REFERENCES

- Albert, D. (2016). After climbing the academic ranks [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 7(2), iv–vi.
- Albert, D. (2016). (Editorial Preface). Reflections and strategies for graduate students. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 7(3), iv–v.
- Albert, D. (2017). How may I help you? [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 8(1), iv.
- Albert, D. (2017). Mixing business with pleasure. [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 8(2), v–vi.
- Albert, D. (2017). [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 8(3), v–vi.
- Albert, D. (2017). A note of appreciation [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 8(4), v–vi.
- Albert, D. (2018). Thanks for the Memories? [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 9(1), v–vi.
- Albert, D. (2018). Top-down and bottom-Up: Thoughts on management [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 9(2), v–vi.
- Albert, D. (2018). Placing students into graduate programs [Editorial Preface]. *International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research*, 9(3), iv.
- Albert, D. P. (2014). The first five years: International Journal of Applied Geospatial Research. In M. Ertürk, A. Uzun, & Ş. Danacıoğlu (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Congress of the Turkish Association of Geographers* (pp. 818-830). Mugla, Turkey: Turkish Association of Geographers Press.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Usually — consider the Peter Principle, or its yet unnamed variant, as when an individual rises multiple levels over his or her incompetence.

Donald Patrick Albert is a professor of geography in the Department of Geography and Geology at Sam Houston State University (Huntsville, TX). He earned geography degrees from Salem State College (B.S.), Appalachian State University (M.A.), and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Ph.D).