

Is geography in R.I. going down the drain?

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Global Village. World understanding. Political Alliances. Trade agreements. Global warming. Cultural differences. Population growth. Refugees and migration. Declining resources. Environmental degradation. It's a big world and it requires study to address these issues, but here in Rhode Island the one school that turns out the most teachers is dropping the subject that specifically speaks to all these problems — geography.

Rhode Island College is the only four-year college of the 11 in the state which currently offers a major of 30 hours credit in geography. Due to inadequate funding at the state level, the College is being forced to drop 27 programs and geography is one of eight designated at the bachelor's level. Most programs targeted have small enrollments, but why geography?

Based on enrollments, some programs are smaller. Of the eight bachelor programs due to be suspended, geography is the only one recognized as a separate field, e.g., medieval/renaissance studies, managerial economics and classical area studies are subfields of other disciplines.

With suspension, the biggest enrollments in geography in the state, over 500 annually, will be dramatically cut, and the only geography major offered in the state (several schools give courses in geography) will be eliminated. Rhode Island will have the distinction of being the only state in North America that does not offer a geography major!

As discouraging as this would be to geography, we write because of the possible effect it would have on the teaching of geography in all of the schools of the state. We say this in light

of the possible repercussions that might come from the National Geographic Society, principal sponsor of our Rhode Island Geography Education Alliance whose role is to improve the teaching of Geography in our schools, reaching from Kindergarten through Grade 12 in both public and private schools.

Over the past five years our Rhode Island Geography Education Alliance (every state now has such an alliance) has received more than \$350,000 from the Geographic and other sponsors. The Geographic has also provided us with more than \$100,000 of their materials, such as maps, videos, books and other teaching aids. In addition, the Geographic has spent over \$100,000 for training more than one quarter of our 61 Teacher Consultants in places such as Washington D.C., Oregon and California as well as Russia and Japan. Ours is one small example of a program on which the Geographic has spent, in the ten years since the program was initiated, over \$85 million to make this program work. And it has!

Currently four states now require a year of high school geography in order to be admitted to the state university system and, everywhere, kids and teachers are getting excited about geography. A visit to your local school will demonstrate this. And the business community has been affected. Andy Nosal of the Map Center, principal supplier of maps in the Providence area, has seen a major increase in business with parents now bringing in their children to purchase maps and other geographic materials.

And think about this — Rhode Island is one of only three states selected by the Geographic to send three of its teachers with three of their students to the Mediterranean this summer for three weeks aboard a U.S. Navy research vessel to study settlements in Italy, Sicily, and Tunisia as well as the climate, geology and oceanography of the area.

Capping this national interest in geography, television sets throughout the country were tuned in on the final competition of the National Geographic Society sponsored "Geography Bee" in Washington D.C. this past last week. Ten youngsters from grades four through eight were competing for the top scholarship award of \$25,000.

Of the five million youngsters who started the competition, 100 competed at the Rhode Island Social Studies Association state level. And of the 57 finalists from each state and territory invited to Washington, Paul Ring of Mt. St. Charles Academy in Woonsocket did Rhode Island proud by being one of the 10 finalists. Three years earlier, Paul's brother walked off with a second prize of \$15,000, and followed that two months later in London where he garnered an extra \$2,000 with two other Americans who defeated teams from

England and Russia.

Here at home, if the major in geography disappears from Rhode Island College (which graciously provides space for our Alliance) there is the distinct possibility that the Geographic might reconsider funding our program because we will not have a base of college geographers with a major in place.

Dropping the geography major at Rhode Island College would not only affect students in higher education but raise the distinct possibility that our Geography Alliance would lose the support of the National Geographic Society, and that would have a deleterious effect on the teaching of geography in all schools of the state.

Rhode Island College administrators must review this drastic measure. The loss to their students, the possible loss of funding for the Alliance to continue its work to improve the teaching of geography in all of our schools and the loss to Rhode Island school children merits their reconsideration. Eliminating the geography major need not and should not happen.

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