

Derek H. Alderman: Don't dilute state K-12 geography standards

Derek H. Alderman is a professor and head of the Department of Geography at the University of Tennessee.

Saturday, July 20, 2013

Meaningful geography instruction in Tennessee's schools will be dealt a substantial blow July 26 if the State Board of Education votes to approve the Tennessee Department of Education's misguided revision of social studies standards for elementary and secondary students.

The Department of Education's attempt at rolling the content of the current, stand-alone high school geography course into hybrid history courses guts much of the geography content, including meaningful physical geography and environmental analysis, introduction of students to geospatial technologies (think geography plus marketable technological skills) and content that reflects current global events and issues.

The Boston Consulting Group estimates that the U.S. geospatial industry generated \$73 billion in revenue last year, with half a million high-wage jobs. Oxera Consulting puts the global revenue number at up to \$270 billion per year. Both consultants estimate the industry is growing 25-30 percent per year, and state that to support this rapid growth we need a workforce trained in geospatial technologies.

Geography departments at universities across the nation are expanding to meet the demand for professional geographers. Much of that growth is directed toward students focusing on geospatial technologies and physical geography, two subject areas minimized in the proposed social studies standards, as well as economic geography and cultural geography. De-emphasizing geography runs counter to broader education and industry trends.

What counts as geography education these days is not the memorizing of capitals and mountain ranges, but the creation of a citizenry and labor force that applies a critical understanding of place and location to today's economic, political and environmental problems. That is what is taught at the college level and it bears little resemblance to the revised social studies standards that are supposedly preparing our young people to be "college and career ready."

As a professional geographer for over 20 years, I am bothered by the message communicated to students and teachers through the revised standards. It is laughable, if not insulting, for the Tennessee Department of Education to believe that geography can simply be subsumed under the teaching of history. It is a position that fails to acknowledge that geography is its own legitimate science.

If students are not exposed to geography in meaningful ways at the high school level, how are they going to develop an interest in a burgeoning field with expanding job potential?

The Tennessee Department of Education mistakenly expects our students' exposure to geography to come through hybrid history courses. Such a scenario is not realistic of what students will encounter in college and the marketplace, and it risks trivializing what geographers study and can do for the world.

One of the most successful students I ever taught became a corporate location analyst. He uses his technological and critical thinking skills to decide where to build stores for major retail chains. If his geographic education had been diluted in the ways now being proposed, then how likely is it that he would have been able to make these contributions to the U.S. economy?



© 2013 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online