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## Introduction

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## Introduction

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Geography is a basic part of our everyday life. We use cellphones to identify locations of our favorite places. We order items online and they move by air or land to our doors. We recycle paper, cans, and bottles. In fact, geography is so integrated into our routines, we tend not to notice how what we do connects to its five themes: location, places, regions, movement, and human-environmental interaction.

In schools, geography is not so basic. Yes, maps are used for location of place and to track movement as well as to adorn walls as decoration. But, often a more substantive study using a geographic perspective is missing. According to *National Geographic*, fewer than one in two high school graduates takes a geography course in middle or high school. Not surprisingly, studies indicate that US students have a poor grasp of the subject content. The 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress report card on geography concluded that eighth graders had made no significant gains since 1994. One quarter of the students tested scored below basic levels while 27% were deemed to be proficient or advanced. In addition, there had been a steady decline in the number of geography programs in higher education after World War II until the mid-1980s.

Conditions are improving. The NCSS named geography as one of the four core social studies disciplines. Similarly, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills' Framework for 21st Century Learning also supports enhanced geography education. It names geography as a core subject and environmental literacy as one of five interdisciplinary themes.

The selections in this special issue of the Councilor provide evidence of the opportunities geography offers to teachers. As the articles amply demonstrate, the study of geography can motivate students to learn. In the process, engaged instruction builds their content knowledge and develops skills that prepare them to effectively and actively participate in society as competent citizens.

Jack Zevin of the Queens College offers insight into an often neglected pre-Columbian culture, the moundbuilders. He offers intriguing comparisons between the earthen mounds found throughout much of the southern and mid western regions of the United States, Zevin also notes the stylistic similarities with pyramids in Mesoamerica, suggesting that cultural contacts may have played a role in the rise of the moundbuilder cultures. His article touches upon important geographic themes such as movement, diffusion, regionalism, and human environmental interaction. Zevin sees a study of the Moundbuilders as an exciting way to open a U. S. history or geography course.

Mark Percy, Rider College, provides a fascinating look at a little known feature of African American life during the age of segregation. He examines the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travelers' guide published for African Americans from 1937 to 1963. Founded by Victor Green and inspired by a similar publication for Jewish motorists, the *Green Book* provided information on places to stay and eat, service and gas stations, entertainment

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venues, and other businesses that would serve African American customers. Percy discusses the racial conditions that created the need for such a publication. He also notes that cars symbolized a degree of freedom for African Americans in the era of separate but equal. He suggests that teachers can have students use modern mapping tools, such as GPS, and the *Green Books* to track routes, including along the famous Route 66 highway from Chicago to Santa Monica. Students could create maps, historical and contemporary, while learning about racial conditions that existed not that long ago.

Prentice Chandler, University of Cincinnati, and Danielle Munch, Glass City Academy explore a different aspect geography teaching, Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW). Noting the lack of proper geographic preparation among high school graduates, they examine the state of geography teaching practice. They suggest that inquiry and geographic practice can be used as ways to begin geography instruction using an AIW format. AIW engages students in the in-depth examination of problem related to real life issues. They discuss how elements of AIW, including constructing knowledge and disciplined inquiry help students over time show their understanding by using the vocabulary of geography. The article also contains a classroom example that involves students in a combined geography-science unit on deforestation of the rainforests that concluded with the development of a school recycling program.

Sandra J. Schmidt, Teachers College, Columbia University, closes the special issue by exploring how landscapes can be used to tell spatial stories. She proposes that studying landscapes helps students gain a deep understanding of places and our relationships to them. Noting that photographs and paintings are frequently sources used to study landscapes, she states that they are subjective images that require us to include such aspects as intentionality and perspective in our examination. She suggests that cultural geographers can use landscapes to study the tension between representation and perception. Schmidt has groups of students study a chosen site for inquiry drawing upon diverse sources and visits. At the end of the study, they complete a project and share the results. Schmidt reports that the projects often say a lot about a student's worldview. She closes the essay by encouraging teachers to give serious attention to preparing young people to make spatial decisions.

In closing, I want to thank all the authors for their participation in this special issue on geography. Jason Stacy, editor of *The Councilor*, has been invaluable in helping me bring this idea to publication. Many thanks to Jason.