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Dr. Chester Beaty improving student registration numbers in geography courses

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Remember how you learned to spell the word "geography" back there in grade school? Sure, it went something like this: George Eats Oats Grandpa Rode A Pig Home Yesterday. Chances are fair that this little piece of nonsense and a recollection that the book contained a lot of maps are all that remain in the average adult's consciousness about the meaning of geography as a study. And as a touring automobile driver and his wife try to unravel the intricacies of a road map, they often wish that geography was something they learned at high school or college level instead of back there in third or fourth grade.

Changing geography into a subject taught in a student's later years would be fine with Dr. Chester Beaty, chairman of the Geography Department at Montana State University. In fact, that's what Beaty does with considerable enthusiasm, generated in part by the fact that there are now about 1,200 or 1,300 MSU students registered in geography courses each year. This number is up from an average of about 500 a year when Beaty first came to the department in 1958.

Why the enthusiasm for geography?

As Beaty puts it, "A clear understanding of geography helps to make the individual a better citizen, and a better judge of what it is that goes on in the world."

In the midst of world crisis, there are not many who wouldn't argue that both factors are highly important. The growing importance of geography can be seen in the fact that it is now being taught as a separate subject at the high school level in Kalispell, and plans are underway to follow a similar path in Missoula and various other places, Beaty says.

(more)
Better citizenship is only a part of it. Various University courses provide specialized training in geography that fits students for professional careers in many different fields. There are some obvious outlets for this type of talent. The Departments of State, Agriculture, Interior, Commerce and Defense all employ geographers. They are found in the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Army map service and throughout the various intelligence agencies. But it is not only government that uses this human product. Business organizations conduct surveys with their help and, of course, there is the time honored role of the geographer in practically every exploration project. Many, of course, will find a career teaching geography.

Perhaps a surprise to the individual who hasn't thought much about it lately is the fact that there is more than one kind of geography. There's climatology, for instance, which studies the elements of weather and the climatic differences that make one part of the world unlike another. There's political geography, economic geography, regional geography, topical geography and physical geography, to mention some of the major branches. And, proving that the studies involve matters close to home as well as far away, one student group at the University is making a long range study of the climatic differences between eastern and western Montana. Beaty says that the contrast is such that Montana might almost be considered as two different states.

As for his own interest, Beaty does research on geomorphology, a study of the world's land forms. He says he does it because he wants to have a better understanding of why the world is the way it is.

And how is the world?

Beaty says it's wrinkled, crooked and lopsided, but it's the best one we've got.