Demographic processes exhibit substantial spatial variation at different scales (e.g., Allen and Turner 1996; De Castro et al. 2006; Entwisle 2007; Eschbach, Mahnken and Goodwin 2005; Riosmena 2009). In my view, describing and explaining this variation is paramount to understanding the nature of these processes substantively as it is in “contextual contingencies” that we comprehend and test the depth and limits of theories.\footnote{Looking at (population-average) associations is not as useful for policy purposes either, as policies should be designed to fit a variety of settings as they cannot oftentimes be unevenly applied across settings. Research aimed to understand spatial variation and, in the end, contextual contingency should thus be at the core of social scientific inquiry.} Looking at (population-average) associations is not as useful for policy purposes either, as policies should be designed to fit a variety of settings as they cannot oftentimes be unevenly applied across settings. Research aimed to understand spatial variation and, in the end, contextual contingency should thus be at the core of social scientific inquiry.

Many techniques have been devised to visualize, describe, summarize, and explain spatial dependencies (e.g., Fotheringham, Brunsdon and Charlton 2002; Goodchild and Janelle 2004; Singer and Willett 2003; Ward and Gleditsch 2008). While it is of course important for population scientists to keep abreast of the use of these techniques, it is perhaps even more relevant to instill a more general type of spatial thinking in population scientists in training. As such, I believe training efforts in Spatial Demography in the future should attempt to continue promoting a general spatial perspective that will survive long after the specific methodological toolbox learnt by the student renders obsolete, but which will also provide a very useful interface for years and one that will allow for the better comprehension of these conceptual tools.\footnote{Just to further clarify: I am not diminishing the importance of learning the actual techniques but underscoring the relevance of the more abstract thinking skills that should be acquired during this process.}

The efforts of centers and programs in places like UCSB, Penn State, Washington, Brown, and North Carolina, aimed to integrate spatial thinking into social and population science, need to be further expanded elsewhere. More importantly, spatial thinking needs to be further incorporated into the core of Demography, Sociology (of Population), and (Population) Economics graduate programs. A possibility would be to offer a population geography/spatial demography course analogous to the economic demography one offered in many departments.

In addition, Geography programs need to produce a larger number of graduates with a firm footing in Demography. We need more “hyphenated demographers” (as Marcia Castro calls them in her statement) that also possess thorough training in spatial thinking to help lead the
way. As most Geography departments in the U.S. have only a couple of population geographers in the Faculty (if any), students might also benefit from supplementary training on formal demographic techniques and on the discipline of Demography. Those of us in Geography Departments have a duty to continue attempting to train and attract individuals, but also to communicate population-minded grad students in Geography of training opportunities elsewhere too.

Although many population geographers participate in the Population Association Meetings and some demographers not affiliated with Geography programs or Spatial Analysis initiatives, more efforts aimed to bridge the relative divide in the two communities might be useful to get spatial thinking more into the mainstream of demographic thinking. Special sessions at either meeting, as that organized by Steven Matthews during the 2011 PAA Meetings, might help bring people to the AAG/PAA meetings that would have otherwise not attended.

A model similar to this has been the model pursued by the PAA and the Mexican Demographic Society to foster more exchanges between the members of the two communities that generally not overlap (and who would benefit from this). Along these lines, the Population Specialty Group at the AAG could organize a whole thematic (or even plenary) session at the AAG meetings featuring PAA members looking at spatial perspectives but who do not normally attend these meetings. By the same token, the PAA would organize a special session with geographers working on population issues at large, but who may not identify as demographers per se (e.g., some medical/health and economic geographers; many GIScientists).

References