



# REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

## Everyday Distance Decay by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

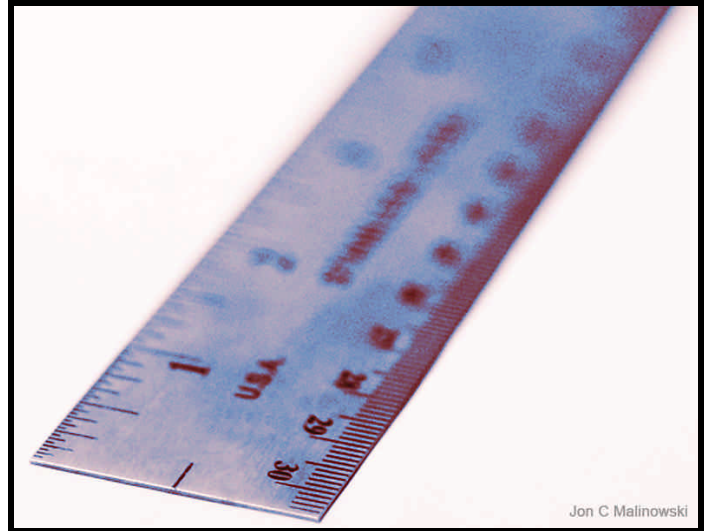
Geographers generally find that things that are closer together are more related than things farther apart. The concept of distance decay is the formal statement of this belief. In our everyday lives we tend to have more interaction with places closer to where we live, work, or go to school. Certainly, personal preferences and experiences sometimes cause us to pass up the closest businesses, but in general, the closer something is, the more likely we will frequent it.

In many ways, the economic geography of our towns and

cities are arranged to accommodate this pattern of behavior. The most common example is the convenience store, which stocks a lot of basic items on the belief that people will not travel far for them. Most convenience stores are basically the same, so it is unlikely that someone will travel twice as far to go to an identical store on the other side of town.

A few years ago, a student of mine investigated the concept of distance decay on our campus. Our students who order food from a restaurant that delivers must pick up the food at a central drop-off point. Delivery persons are not allowed to enter the housing areas. Because of this, some students are very close to the drop-off area and some are much farther away.

My student surveyed about 100 people in each of several dormitories. He asked them how often, in a typical week, they ordered food from a take-out place. Then, he walked the distance from each dorm to the drop-off point and recorded the distance as a time. While not technically a measure of distance, the time it takes to get



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the food is a practical substitute.

When the data was analyzed, we found that students closest to the drop-off point did indeed order food more often than students farther away. As the dorm location got farther from the delivery point, the frequency of food ordering declined.

While this simple study is not going to revolutionize the field of geography, it highlights that the concepts we learn as geographers do not work simply for important issues at the national or international scale. Rather,

in many instances they affect our lives at the local and regional scale as well.

As you learn more about geography, look around your own town and campus and think about the processes that influence spatial behavior in your own life and in the lives of your friends and classmates.

*Special Thanks to Chuck for his research on this topic.*

### Further Research

1. Human spatial behavior is the realm of the behavioral geographer. Check out the behavioral geography section of your campus library. You may also find interesting books under the heading of "environmental psychology".
2. Do a small study on your campus of some aspect of spatial behavior. Look for differences among groups of people. For example, do men and women use the campus differently?
3. If your campus has more than one dining hall, computer lab, or other commonly used facility, can you discover a pattern of use for each location. Does distance play a factor?

### Links:

- Environmental Perception and Behavioral Geography Specialty Group of the AAG  
<http://www.dean.usma.edu/geo/Geog/EPBG/index.htm>
- Overview of Environmental Psychology  
<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~rdeyoung/envtpsych.html>