

EDGE at the Applied Geography Conference

The AAG's EDGE project was recently highlighted in a keynote session at the 2010 Applied Geography Conference in Fort Worth, Texas. The session featured EDGE researchers Michael Solem and Jan Monk leading a panel discussion on "Careers for Enhancing Society and the Environment," focused on identifying important trends in industry and government and understanding their implications for geographers seeking employment in these sectors.

The panel was composed of geographers with diverse professional experiences and expertise in preparing and hiring geographers in business, government, and nonprofit organizations: Richard Boehm (Texas State University, San Marcos), Larry Carlson (Carlson and Associates), Robert Czerniak (New Mexico State University), Kate Edwards (Englobe, Inc.), John H. Haake (J.H. Haake Market Research, LLC), Kingsley Haynes (George Mason University), and Linda Peters (ESRI, Inc.).

Several panelists addressed the globalization of the world of work in terms of increasing competition and the need for U.S. corporations and companies to become engaged abroad. Location-based services requires geographic knowledge of place, and this applies to many sectors—retail, IT, fast food restaurants, and health care, among many examples. For geographers, there are opportunities to contribute their expertise in dealing with the spatialization of information and their knowledge of cultural and political contexts that will make corporate initiatives acceptable and successful in sites outside the U.S.

Within the U.S., the panel noted a number of structural changes likely to have a positive impact on future career opportunities for geographers. These include demographic shifts in the workforce, such as imminent retirement of baby boomers in federal government agencies and NGOs; the aging of populations prompting a need for expansion of geographical applications for enhancing the delivery of health care services; and the increasing prevalence of outsourcing of government functions to the private sector. A pervasive pattern throughout these sectors is the growth of

GIS as an "enterprise technology" through geospatial applications in health, sales, human resources, and diverse business environments. In light of these changes, the panel noted a number of skills that geographers need beyond technical or specialist knowledge in a particular subfield.

The panel also emphasized the need for geographers to be creative in marketing one's geographic skills in the workforce. They shared anecdotes of the value of being proactive in spatializing problems and proposing geographic approaches to everyday company operations or special projects. For example, one panelist applies her knowledge of cultural geography to develop culturally appropriate development strategies for computer software and content for video games—a perspective which she successfully used to create her own company which performs work for major software companies, among others.

Next, the panel turned its attention to what geography programs are doing well in terms of preparing their students for careers, and what areas are in need of change or improvement. Invariably, the panel struck an upbeat note as to the capacity of geography programs being able to place geography graduates at all levels into interesting and rewarding careers, but that not all programs enjoyed the same level of success. The panel offered a number of recommendations for geography programs of all types to consider as they continually assess the effectiveness of their curricula and degree programs.

In addition to the opening panel, the conference included sessions that addressed in more detail examples of ethical dilemmas for geographers working in the business world and of approaches to supporting programs in applied geography. Among those highlighted was the importance of developing faculty mentors and leaders in the field of business geography.

The AAG's EDGE project is currently exploring systematically the issues discussed in Fort Worth through research and outreach engaging academic departments and employer organizations. Through surveys and work logs, EDGE researchers are analyzing the work activities and experi-

ences of geography professionals employed in the private and public sectors. EDGE researchers are also implementing case studies and industry surveys with a variety of employer organizations in an effort to improve understanding of the factors and trends shaping employment prospects for geographers. In addition, the EDGE project is currently conducting surveys and interviews with graduate students and faculty to explore the role of master's education, including professional master's degrees and certificate programs, in preparing geography students for careers in business, government, and nonprofit organizations.

Complementing this research are a variety of outreach activities (such as those at the Applied Geography Conference described above) and workshops designed to engage employers, department leaders, and practitioners in dialogue aimed at identifying promising strategies for improving the career preparation and readiness of geography students. To assist these efforts, the EDGE project is currently developing a book, *Practicing Geography: Careers for Enhancing Society and the Environment*, scheduled for publication in winter 2012. *Practicing Geography* is being written by geographers with extensive professional experience working in public and private sectors. The book will offer readers effective advice for career planning, choosing internships, and developing professional networks that can lead to an exciting career in the corporate world, government, consulting, international organizations, and many other types of workplaces. It will emphasize the importance of achieving success through work-life balance, making ethical decisions, and lifelong learning and professional development.

For more information about the AAG's EDGE project, please contact Michael Solem (msolem@aag.org) or visit www.aag.org/edge/. ■

Michael Solem
Janice Monk