Among the many highlights of the 2011 AAG Annual Meeting was a morning symposium for chairs and heads of academic geography departments. Organized by AAG President Ken Foote and led with the help of Alec Murphy, J.W. Harrington, Jr., Audrey Kobayashi, Dave Lanegran and Nancy Wilkinson, the symposium attracted upwards of 30 department chairs from a diverse array of academic institutions to explore strategies for strengthening the discipline's status in higher education and society. These discussions represent the latest sharing of ideas among geography programs about our collective future. They were conducted in the same spirit of openness and community-building that characterizes the annual AAG Department Leadership workshops, held since 2004 to develop the leadership skills of department chairs and promote vibrant, healthy departments. Ken Foote has organized the next Department Leadership Workshop, focused on the theme of “Supporting Early Career Faculty,” to be held June 15-18, 2011 at the University of Colorado in Boulder. (To register, visit www.aag.org/cs/education/healthy_departments/overview.)

The conversations in Seattle were remarkable and illustrate the positive trajectory the discipline has enjoyed over the last decade. While some geography programs are still experiencing difficulties, many of which relate to the recent economic crisis, today geographers tend to speak from a position of strength and opportunity, for reasons we'll briefly review in this article. Although the recommendations that emerged from the symposium offer practical signposts for maintaining the discipline's forward momentum, it should be stressed that the responsibility for stewarding the discipline is a shared one in which all geographers and geographers-at-heart – students and parents, teachers and administrators, academic faculty and chairs, business and government professionals – can play important roles, as can the AAG and its sister organizations.

Continued on page 4

Making a Case for Geography: A Shared Responsibility

The United Nations and New York are joined at the hip. The 39-story UN Secretariat building on the East River waterfront is one of the most distinguishable profiles on the city's skyline. But it wasn't inevitable that the UN became part of the New York cityscape. After it had been decided to accept the American offer to host the new world organization in 1945, a special site committee looked into various options, including Philadelphia, Boston and San Francisco. Manhattan emerged as a dark horse once John D. Rockefeller, Jr., offered $8.5 million for the purchase of the present site.

New York, site of the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting, is not the only UN headquarters location. The organization has headquarters presence in a number of cities around the world, including Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Beirut, Geneva, Nairobi, Santiago de Chile and Vienna. In addition, there are UN offices in most developing countries of the world. New York, however, is first among equals. The office of the Secretary-General is located here and the city is host to several of the central organs of the UN.

Continued on page 2

A Global Organization in a Global City
AAG Annual Meeting, February 24-28, 2012

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In the context of higher education, a number of ideas were aired emphasizing the interdisciplinary qualities of geography and opportunities to substantially contribute to the mission of both liberal arts and STEM education. Also discussed were the importance of supporting the capacity of departments to generate research, develop robust curricula, and mentor students and early career faculty.

Participants’ ideas fell into two broad categories. First, they identified a variety of strategies for asserting the intellectual and practical importance of geography in compelling and engaging terms for other academics as well as for campus administrators. Key trends in higher education include internationalization, an interest in sustainability, and the enhancement of curricula with intercultural learning experiences. Geography is especially relevant to all three. Other participants noted that geographical knowledge, technologies, and perspectives are increasingly required to reach solutions to contemporary, yet historically persistent environmental, social, and economic problems, such as those explored in the recent National Research Council report, Understanding the Changing Planet: Strategic Directions for the Geographical Sciences (www.nap.edu).

Alec Murphy (who chaired the National Research Council committee that wrote the report) noted that, as an entity of the National Academy of Science, NRC reports “mean something in almost all administrative circles,” and therefore offer geography departments a powerful tool for augmenting their ongoing communication efforts. To assist these efforts further, the AAG is currently developing a companion multimedia educational website for Understanding the Changing Planet in collaboration with the NRC committee. When completed in early 2012, the website will offer a variety of educational resources for use in schools and university classrooms, as well as in outreach efforts to policymakers and the general public.

Of course, current economic difficulties facing many higher education institutions are creating resource constraints, requiring departments to “do more with less.” Given this situation, participants emphasized that it becomes especially important for geography departments to build and maintain solid relationships with the campus administration. Toward this end, J.W. Harrington advised department chairs to know what their administrators are, their roles, and what their goals are with regard to budgets, enrollments, research and teaching emphases, and so forth — noting this information should also be communicated to departmental colleagues. Furthermore, chairs need to tailor their message to support and reflect the administration’s goals — in other words, the “bottom-up” message has to feed into the larger picture, which will depend upon local contexts. Key questions include: What do you want? Why do you want it? and How will you use that to move toward your stated goals? Answering these questions requires having a vision, such as that achieved through strategic planning and self-assessment. The “Education” and “Projects and Programs” sections of the AAG’s website offer disciplinary data and many other publications that can help departments plan for the future.

Participants in the chairs’ symposium also emphasized that, when making a case for geography, messages need to resonate with women and underrepresented minorities. Speaking toward an inclusive range of career interests and illustrating the contributions of women and minority geographers — and spotlighting all of these on departmental websites and media — remain essential components of diversity-related outreach activities. The AAG, through its ALIGNED project and related diversity initiatives, offers individuals and departments a collection of strategies for enhancing diversity on campus and in the workforce. ALIGNED recently piloted a toolkit that departments can use to improve the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students in geography, supported with assessment resources that departments can use to monitor their progress. Results from the pilot will be used to expand the toolkit in the future.

The symposium participants also discussed at length the need to improve public understanding of geography beyond higher education, noting the steady uptick in jobs available for geographers in business, government, and nonprofit organizations. Another trend worth noting is the growth of AP Human Geography, which is increasing student interest in the discipline and contributing to the recruitment of undergraduate majors. In 2011, over 85,000 students will take the AP Human Geography exam — a dramatic rise from the 3,272 exams administered in 2002. When such trends are discussed in tandem with the rapid deployment of geographic information technologies across the private and public sectors, a unifying message can be developed to counter public misunderstandings about geography and demonstrate its multiple scientific and practical dimensions.

The AAG continues to collect data and make available information on these and other pertinent issues related to education and careers. For example, the AAG’s EDGE project has implemented a broad array of surveys, interviews, and case studies with professional geographers and employer organizations to identify factors and conditions affecting the employment landscape for geographers and the variety of ways geographers are contributing to the work of businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Many analytical reports and practical publications will stem from these efforts, including the AAG’s Practicing Geography book (to be published in early 2012) developed to improve the preparation of geographers for careers in the public and private sectors. The AAG’s Careers in Geography website, recently updated with a database on categories, types, and numbers of geography-related occupations, will undergo further development throughout the summer, offering new resources for students, parents, guidance counselors, and career advisors. For further information about these studies and resources, visit www.aag.org/edge and www.aag.org/careers. Articles that can be useful to departments in their efforts to move forward may be found at www.aag.org/cs/education/healthy_departments/resources.

Given the success of this year’s symposium, Ken Foote has offered to organize another symposium for the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting in New York, perhaps on the topic of program reviews and strategic planning. We invite your feedback on all of these initiatives, and look forward to engaging you in our shared efforts to advance geography.

— Michael Solem, Joy Adams, and Jean McKendry, AAG

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

ALIGNED stands for Addressing Locally-tailored Infrastructure & Geoscience Needs for Enhancing Diversity. To learn more visit www.aag.org/diversity.