

AAG Newsletter
of the
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Bowling Together: Participatory Geography at the AAG

The recent growth in membership and active participation within the AAG reflects a counter-trend to what is happening in many of our peer associations, and to Robert Putnam's famous thesis, *Bowling Alone*, which chronicles a demise of collaborative participatory activity and the decline of US social capital. The fact that the number of AAG members has grown by two thirds over the past decade, and that annual meeting attendance this



Solis and Richardson.

year is expected to reach double its registration in 2002 is remarkable—indeed, perhaps unparalleled by sister organizations. Still, these quantitative measures do not adequately capture the talent, synergistic creativity, and collective voluntary process that we as an association of professionals and academics in geography and related fields are generating today. AAG members do not just pay their dues and list the affiliation on their resumes. You belong. You participate. Despite broader trends to the contrary, more geographers are bowling than ever before, and they are bowling together, and in a big league: the AAG.

The value of AAG member participation is incalculable. The time, energy, and effort that AAG members, staff, and officers alike contribute to the AAG, well beyond that which is typical or required, not only strengthens the organization but also builds the discipline, and this is reflected in the very vitality of geography today. While each individual may benefit in some tangible way through their volunteerism, immediate tangible reward is usually not sufficient to fully account for why a person might expend his or her effort in service to the association. Chairing an AAG Specialty Group or peer-reviewing articles for AAG journals are neither glamorous nor highly remunerative activities. But when asked by their colleagues or the AAG Council to participate, most readily and often enthusiastically step forward

to help. When asked why they belong to the AAG or why they participate, most members respond with some version of "because I am a geographer, and a strong and healthy AAG

is important to geography and by extension to our world." Service and making a difference seem to be at the core of our identities, individual and collective, even if they are expressed in different ways. The incremental volunteer investment in creating and sustaining a strong discipline often involves

long-term personal rewards as well, including friendships formed and stimulating interaction with colleagues outside our normal orbits, or making a difference in the lives of others not so fortunate as we might be. Especially now, in economically strapped times for universities, public agencies, private enterprises and individuals alike, taking part in and working as an association together with one another can help us all collectively traverse these tough times in better shape.

We have tried to create an open organization at the AAG that encourages and facilitates member participation in many and varied ways. There are so many interesting and meaningful ways for you to participate in and become more involved in your association. This is reflected wherever one looks. AAG members are willing to serve on committees and to stand for elected office on the council. Others are working at the regional division level to grow connections among members in place, and reaching out to young scholars to begin their practice as academics and professionals. Many engage with peers around specialty and affinity groups, organizing themed sessions for the annual meeting, coordinating paper and research awards, finding travel support, and honoring both young students and renowned scholars close to these communities. Diversity ambassadors are sharing

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their personal experiences so that others can learn from their unique insights. Senior Associates are giving in new ways of their time and talents amassed over many years of research, education and service. Conference Assistants help with their friendly support to make our meetings run smoothly. Project Advisors lend their experience and expertise in needed subjects to the AAG's externally funded programs and initiatives. Manuscript reviewers and editors pore over, edit, and re-edit draft articles to ensure the high quality of our journals and publications. Officers and Councillors volunteer many hours over the course of their terms, and offer solid leadership and direction to the association.

At Meridian Place, AAG staff weave networks, harness and channel energy, create platforms, concentrate and celebrate the mass of talent and energy that comprises the association. Fulfilling our responsibilities of serving and working for our community, and also to lead, we are immersed daily in the palpable human reality of what Putnum would have dryly termed social capital. We

take pride in working collaboratively with each other on the AAG staff, and with AAG members broadly throughout the discipline to try to help foster an environment of social cohesion, openness, and scholarly innovation and commitment that transcends individual interests, subfields and sectors. What brings us together is more than a set of interactive relationships, although the texture of personal relations matter a great deal. It is also a vision and commitment to the serious and very hard work of generating the new ideas, the actions, the leadership, and the day-to-day sustained effort necessary to create new opportunities for geography and the world around us. That involves all of us, and your role is the most important of all.

So when you come soon to the AAG Annual Meeting in Washington, DC to enjoy the next moment of your participation in our professional and academic society, pause to reflect on the magic of what you are doing, of what we are all doing together. We will not simply be sharing space in time,

meeting in rooms to hear each other speak. We will be fostering something larger than ourselves, something that we have been in the process of developing for many years in the past, and will be doing for years to come. Looking ahead, consider how else this collective enterprise might benefit from having you contribute your talents. Join a specialty group, serve on a committee, nominate an honoree, run for election, lend your eye to edit a paper, offer to mentor a young scholar. While in the nation's capital, we welcome you to stop by Your Meridian Place and sense the history of accumulated contributions from the past 100+ years. While we do not have a bowling alley in the basement, unlike other DC landmarks of past presidential administrations nearby, we look forward to continue bowling together with each and all of you. ■

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