Increasing Connectivity

When a National Science Foundation program officer asks someone to review a proposal, we ask them to evaluate the proposal in accordance with two merit review criteria: What is the intellectual merit of the proposed activity? What are its broader impacts?

The success of investigators in demonstrating the intellectual merit of their work will depend on their showing that they are likely to conduct scientifically sound research and that the research will be grounded in and contribute to broader theoretical understanding. With respect to broader impacts, they need to engender confidence that they will be successful in one or more of the following realms — integrating research with education, broadening the diversity of the scientific workforce, contributing to the scientific infrastructure, and contributing new insights and information that benefit society.

When seeking support from other funding agencies or when responding to a diverse range of other external needs, scholars and practitioners may well have different criteria for evaluating success. But common to the criteria used by all researchers is the need to conduct work soundly and effectively, to produce useful knowledge, and to communicate new knowledge to those who need it.

When considering this general topic at a meeting a few years ago, I was especially struck by the comments of David Hodge, a former NSF Geography and Regional Science Program Director who was then a dean at the University of Washington and now is the President of Miami University in Ohio. Displaying the kind of perspective that years in higher administrative positions give a person, David stressed that a critical goal for many of the activities in academe and related environments is summarized in a single word — connectivity.

Many geographers have successfully enhanced the connectivity of their work to others. They stand as models for all of us to emulate. No one should try to increase connectivity in every possible way. But each of us can consider ways we might stretch ourselves and share our work to a broader audience than we otherwise might try to reach. Options abound, whether we talk about core geographic issues with a broader cross-section of geographers, build stronger collaborative ties with colleagues in other fields, speak more directly to those who may find our research useful in practical contexts, work with educators to enhance the knowledge and skills of students or the public, or relate the knowledge we have generated to groups of emerging scholars who generally had not seen geography as a viable career option in the past.

We usually cannot predict what opportunities may come our way, but we should be alert to possibilities and seek to take advantage of changes to increase our connectivity whenever possible.

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