

The Regional Advantage

Regions are inherently geographical. As sets of locations that share common characteristics or that are linked in some functional manner, regions help us organize space in meaningful ways.

In addition to their research and pedagogical value, regions play an integral role in the operations of the Association of American Geographers. Nine of the 18 members of the AAG Council, the association's governing body, are elected by the membership at large, but the other nine are elected in each of nine geographically oriented regions.

Although the nine regional divisions are treated as equals in the AAG's governing documents, they function in different ways. Some publish journals. Some provide support to facilitate the participation of students in the national meetings. While the smallest region, the Middle Atlantic Division, conducts a number of dinner or lunch meetings and field trips, other regions focus their efforts to facilitate interaction among geographers by convening annual meetings.

From late September through the early part of the week of Thanksgiving this year, all nine AAG regional divisions will conduct annual meetings. Personal health and airline connections permitting, I will attend seven of those nine meetings. I will miss two regional meetings because of scheduling conflicts, but I attended the annual meetings in those regions last year, so over a 13-month span, I will participate in meetings of all nine regions. While some colleagues wonder why I would want to travel so much, I relish the opportunity to attend regional meetings because of the wonderful opportunities they offer.

Because participants come from a more restricted area, regional meetings function at a smaller scale. Attendance is measured in the hundreds, not the thousands, and the number of concurrent sessions rarely exceeds the number of fingers on your hand rather than the number of playing cards in a deck. It's easier to find people and engage in extended discussions with them. Schedules usually are more flexible,

and the mix of papers or posters in a session frequently encourages discussion of broader-ranging themes and issues during the session itself.

The average number of people attending regional meeting sessions is roughly equivalent to the average number in sessions at the AAG annual meeting, so high-quality feedback still is provided to presenters. The less- hectic pace and smaller scale of regional meetings make them less intimidating and therefore an ideal setting for students to make presentations of preliminary honors paper, thesis, or dissertation research results.

While intellectual stimulation usually is the most valuable benefit for those presenting papers or posters at meetings, other benefits can be realized. One participant at the Great Plains-Rocky Mountains meeting in Denver this year told me that the chair of one of the region's larger departments heard a graduating senior give an excellent talk on her research at a previous meeting. The chair was so impressed with the student's talk that he offered her a TA appointment at his university if she chose to attend grad school there. While it's conceivable that such an offer might have been made at a larger meeting, it's much less likely that the chair would have heard the presentation of another school's undergraduate student.

Another advantage of regional meetings is that they usually are less expensive. Transport, lodging, and registration costs generally are much lower. The smaller size of the regions often makes it feasible for interested faculty and students to get a university van and make the trip to and from the meeting into an opportunity for field exploration as well as good fellowship.

A complaint frequently expressed when participants talk about regional meetings is that some of the region's departments, especially some larger departments at major research universities, rarely partici-

pate in the meetings. Reasons cited for this lack of participation include a perceived tendency for both faculty and students in those departments to go to larger meetings of national organizations like the American Geophysical Union. Others assert that some larger departments are arrogant and that they simply don't want to interact with smaller departments in the region.

While alternative opportunities always will be present, I sense that in many regions, inertia is a significant factor. Some departments don't actively participate in regional meetings because they haven't done so in the past. Regional meetings aren't prominent on their radar screens, while other departments have made participation in regional meetings an integral part of departmental culture.

Rather than lamenting the absence of their missing colleagues, those active in the regional meetings should use personal contacts to involve geographers from all departments in the region in meaningful ways in future meetings. Don't wait for people to respond to a general call for papers. Identify individuals you'd like to see participate and invite them to join you for some special activity. And don't focus solely on one person, but instead ask a group of geographers to become involved. For example, you can invite a colleague to bring some students to the next meeting so that they can all participate in a special session or workshop. Or ask colleagues who have conducted research in the area near the meeting site to conduct a field trip.

Be imaginative and look for other opportunities that present themselves. Regardless of how you proceed, make a special effort to be sure that all geographers in your region feel welcome, and work to make the regional meeting a gathering that all participants will see as beneficial. ■

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