

What's Regional about AAG Regions?

The region has been a central concept in geography since its inception, yet no concept is more disputed or elusive. The region has been defined variously as natural, self-evident, rooted in common sense, historical, ideological, political, cultural, economic, even whimsical. The region also plays a significant official role in structuring the AAG. The AAG Council comprises an Executive Committee, six national councillors for whom all members of the association are entitled to vote, and nine regional councillors elected by the regional divisions. They represent vastly different numbers of AAG members, vastly different sizes, and number of states. They are all made up of contiguous states (except Alaska and Hawaii, in the Pacific Coast region), although the borders do not necessarily represent traditional popular notions of American regions.

I had the pleasant opportunity to spend much of the autumn of 2011 travelling to regional meetings (I did miss a couple, unfortunately, because of scheduling conflicts) and learning first-hand about what the regions have in common, as well as what differentiates them. Another of the pleasant traditions of the AAG presidency is posing questions to the councillors for discussion at meetings (I reported on the question to the national councillors last month). Partly through my observations at the regional meetings, and partly in response to a number of issues that have arisen on Council, I asked the regional representatives to come to the Fall Council meeting prepared to discuss the question, "What's regional about the regions?" Several

councillors sent the question to their members, and showed up with poll results. I share with you now the gist of the conversation, which raised some important topics that concern the future of both the association and the discipline.

The regional divisions sponsor a number of important initiatives, the most important of which is their annual meeting, highlights of which include strong student participation (although proportions of graduate and undergraduate papers vary), field trips that allow attendees to become more familiar with the geographies of their regions, and the opportunity to get to know one another in a setting that is less formal, less overwhelming, and less expensive than the national meeting. Many of those I spoke with across the country, as well as who responded to the regional councillor polls, were department chairs who appreciate the opportunity to discuss and share strategies with other regional departmental chairs, especially those who operate within common state systems. Most of the divisions sponsor annual awards to students and faculty for their scholarly and service contributions. They all have established practices and procedures built on longstanding tradition, collaboration, and camaraderie. And of course the Geography Bowl is one of the most important traditions that brings students together and helps to establish a sense of regional identity.

I do want to salute that small group of such departments and individuals who do make an effort). There are lots of reasons, that involve legitimate concerns over time, money, and priorities; but the fact is that there is huge indifference to regional division activities across the country. The implications are extensive; they affect the potential for mentoring students and newer faculty across the region and in a variety of institutions, the impact on local research and participation in public policy formation, and the development of stronger linkages between undergraduate and graduate programs. Maybe all of these things can be done in other ways, but the regional division provides an important structure

in which to organize collaborative activities.

Many questions also arose over who belongs to what region. Would some of the states that currently have few participating departments be more active if they belonged to another region? Is the state even the appropriate level for regional organization? Is there potential to combine regions (e.g., East and West Lakes) to maximize resources? What should be the regional role in engaging colleagues around the borders and the Caribbean, and what is the basis for international affiliation? Some divisions have strong ties with Canadian departments (the 2011 NESTVAL meeting was in Montreal), but the relationship is variable and informal along the border.

I raise these questions not to challenge the regional AAG structure, but to recognize the regional challenges that percolate through the discipline. As one councillor put it, the regional boundaries as historically constituted are tolerable, but the questions indicate a need for more work by Council and the divisions, as well as departments, to make the most of our structure. In a discipline in which the region plays such an important conceptual role, can we also enhance its organizational role? ■

Audrey Kobayashi
kobayasi@queenssu.ca



Kobayashi

