An AAG Mission for the Twenty-first Century

It is a truism to say that the mission and scope of any organization is a product of its own history. The AAG was formed to advance the discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when professional geography (like many other academic disciplines) was seeking to consolidate and advance its position in government, private, and educational circles. Reflecting this early mission, the Association described its purpose in the following manner (and this still appears in our Guide to Geography Programs in North America), "The Association of American Geographers is a scholarly, nonprofit organization founded in 1904 to advance professional studies in geography and to encourage the application of geographic research in business, education and government." In the AAG constitution, this is followed by a series of objectives that focus on serving geography and geographers.

Now we find ourselves at the dawn of the twenty-first century living through critical times of rising poverty and inequality across places; of struggles over environmental protection; of health pandemics; and enormous environmental and humanitarian disasters; as well as intense conflicts from Darfur to Iraq. At the same time, advances in our discipline allow us to speak evermore richly to societal challenges in this new century. And so I suggest that we revisit the way we frame the mission of the AAG. Our current mission statement focuses exclusively on ourselves, on advancing geography and the application of geographic research to standards of relevance defined by governmental, regulatory, or corporate agencies/actors. And yet as a community of scholars and practitioners, we have a broader commitment to serving the public good and to preparing citizens for the challenging times in which we live. I propose that we revisit this mission and express our outward orientation, as AAG members and as geographers, and highlight our goal of contributing to world understanding and to larger societal problems.

Beyond this question of which audiences we are addressing, many of us work in colleges and universities where we teach geography as a fundamental element of a liberal education in which critical thinking and basic research are our central goals. This is another reason for revisiting our mission statement, because it currently emphasizes the application of geographic research. There are many among us who resist strong pressures (from the government and some funding agencies) to justify all of our work on the basis of its immediate applicability. This is coupled with a strong desire to defend the societal importance of what my colleague Rick Roth refers to as "gadfly institutions" in society—structures that engage in critical debate and that pursue knowledge for its own sake, rather than for a strategic or economic return. Revisiting the language in our AAG mission statement allows us to explicitly consider these values and to focus our collective energies on how geographic analysis can advance world understanding.

Our discipline has evolved and expanded in very exciting ways over the last 100 years, as can be clearly seen from the provocative centennial essays commissioned by Alec Murphy and published in the Annals of the AAG (December, 2004). These essays refer to the breadth and depth of theoretical and methodological advances through which we understand the global and intellectual shifts swirling around us. Geographers have made great strides in many arenas, theorizing and analyzing the spatiality of capitalism, complex geographies of privilege and exclusion, scalar-geographies of climate and ecosystem changes, the power of geospatial techniques for serving society, spaces of vulnerability in nature-society relations, poverty and inequality under neoliberal governance, how state power and governance is refracted through religious difference, health pandemics across places, and the list can of course, go on.

Inevitably, we each view the field through our own lens and we would create different (but I hope overlapping) lists of the challenges that face society. My point is that we have made enormous advances in critical analysis in the last fifty years and we need to self-consciously build an AAG mission and goals that take this work into account. For me, a reworked mission statement would also explicitly promote the diversity of geography on behalf of the entire profession. I am not advocating that we highlight only one theoretical or methodological slice of our discipline, even as I do suggest we should foreground our work in service of more inclusive visions of society. While much work on social and environmental justice is carried out by those engaged with Marxist, feminist and anti-racist theories, it is equally true that researchers from across the full range of theoretical and methodological approaches are involved with questions of equity, inequality, and questions of justice. Geospatial technologies are being put to work for social and environmental justice. Geographic data collection, analysis, and spatial representation are actively being employed to construct policies that are more inclusive and attentive to the concerns and needs of groups that have historically been excluded from decision-making (see for example work by Mei-Po Kwan, Paul Robbins, Sarah Elwood, Kathleen O’Reilly, Eugene Martin’s organization CommEn Space in Seattle, and the CIMAS foundation in collaboration with geographers in Ecuador, to name only a few).

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 Degrees who earned their degrees between July 1, 1995 and June 30, 1999 in anthropology, communication, geography, history, political science, and sociology may soon be asked to participate in a national survey focused on job search, work-life choices and dilemmas, and doctoral program evaluation. The survey, “Social Science PhDs—Five Years Out” is funded by the Ford Foundation. Five to nine years out is an ideal time to reflect on career choices and doctoral education because in that time PhDs have had opportunities to see how well their education has prepared them for their careers.

Invitations to participate will be sent by electronic and postal mail. If you receive an invitation, please complete the survey. The information gathered from this survey will guide doctoral program re-assessment efforts across the country. The survey is administered by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), located at the University of Washington in Seattle. For more information about the survey, visit CIRGE’s website at www.cirge.washington.edu.

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