

From the 'Big Easy' to the 'Big Challenges'

Last month we celebrated a highly successful annual meeting in the 'Big Easy' of New Orleans. From the excitement of Mardi Gras (and the lively comments of Andrei Codrescu who introduced us to the city), to the stimulation of almost 4,000 geographers coming together to renew friendships, develop new linkages, and exchange ideas on the breadth of geography, the meeting proved to be a success. To put on such a meeting requires the efforts of many, and I would like to thank the local support group, the program planning committee, and the Meridian Place staff for their efforts.

I was pleased to be part of the Presidential Plenary, along with Susan Hanson, Kamlesh Lulla, Tom Wilbanks, and Jack Dangermond. They provided a wonderful range of comments on how geographers are crossing boundaries (from the community level to globally) to build partnerships. Such perspectives are crucial as we continue to enhance interactions between academic geographers and those in business, industry, and government agencies.

Past President Jan Monk's address touched the emotions of many as she illustrated through the lens of gender, historical themes of employment, women's consciousness, and approaches to dealing with different institutional climates. And, on the final day, I was reminded at the Awards Luncheon about the rich tradition of our discipline and the wonderful range of research topics and researchers (junior and senior) that are being recognized through our specialty groups, and the career accomplishments of our finest as they were called forward to receive honors.

Yet, after the high, positive emotions of the meeting (yes, even after attending more than 30 events in my official role as AAG President, I can still say it was positive), I now move on to the 'big challenges' that a majority of us face at our respective universities, businesses, and government entities—tightening budgets and the implications this might have for

our departments and the discipline. I led a discussion on this topic as part of the AAG Council meeting in New Orleans and some suggested that I include thoughts about this in my column.

In one of my earlier presidential columns I wrote about the characteristics of a 'successful geography department.' As we begin to address the challenge of tighter budgets, I feel it is important that I expand on some of those comments to highlight important ways to strengthen geography programs within our respective universities. In contrast to 25 years ago, geography is in a much stronger position at universities nationwide. Many more university administrators understand geography and appreciate its value. At the same time, universities are becoming more entrepreneurial, in some ways they are fashioning themselves in the 'business model.' Whether we like it or not, one needs only to look at feature articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to understand these transformations in higher education. And, even if one is part of a strong geography program, I feel we can gain by being sensitive to some of the key productivity indicators used to assess departmental and curricular strengths.

What are some of these productivity measures? Many of them are obvious, such as student credit hours, number of majors, extramural research dollars generated, number of courses in the university core curriculum, and graduate degrees produced. Geography programs need to be strongly represented in these standard measures. Other indicators might include alumni relationships, both from a development perspective and from an advisory role. Departments should have a clear mission that is aligned with their college or university's mission (how well that



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mission has been articulated at the administrative level is also crucial). The effectiveness of faculty in networking across campus, and the success of faculty and students in receiving campus and national awards will certainly help as well. At many institutions, if faculty members publish in the best journals or with well-known book publishers, this is

highly valued as an important performance indicator. And, of course, if your department is recognized as student-centered and one that engages students in new and exciting ways, that will help strengthen your position within the university.

As I have mentioned to some of you, when I attended the national dean's meeting last November, the most well attended session focused on 'how to deal with increasing enrollments during declining budgets.' The reality is, whether we like it or not, budgets are tightening, and at the same time, we are being asked to do more with less. As we face these challenges, we need to ensure that our departments have strong performance indicators and that the discipline of geography continues to be seen as central to higher education and is secure within our own universities. As always, I welcome your input as we face these challenges together. ■

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