

What I Have Learned from You

My term as AAG President has flown by and it is hard to imagine that this is already my last newsletter column. The past year has been a memorable one with many significant markers including the establishment of the Center of Geographical Analysis at Harvard University, the AAG breaking the 10,000 member mark, and the record breaking attendance of 6,700 at our annual meeting in San Francisco. Yet what made this year an extraordinary one for me was that it gave me the opportunity to interact with you, AAG members representing the breadth and diversity of our association. I take this opportunity to share a little of what I have learned from you this year and to give you a sense of why I am so positive about the future of the AAG and geography.

From those that responded to my columns on internationalization and study abroad:

From your emails, I learned that you have been teaching study abroad courses for years, and have worked hard to establish international educational and research partnerships and exchanges before these came into vogue. Some of you are leading global education efforts on your campuses through administrative appointments in international programs offices. You lament, however, the lack of participation by geography students in your programs and wish that your work was appreciated as much by your discipline/department as it is by others. Hearing from you reinforced my perception that geographers indeed are involved in internationalization efforts, but that it is now time for us to build on these individual efforts by making a disciplinary commitment to study abroad. The AAG has taken recent steps in this direction through its PAIGH initiative and by instituting a reduced membership for geographers from less developed countries. We need to parallel this effort in our departments and programs. (A quick test: does your departmental homepage – or at least the page for your undergraduate programs -- have a link for "study abroad"?)

From those that I met at the AAG regional division meetings:

You demonstrated a genuine pride and loyalty toward your regional division as you shared with me its history and tradition. The papers and posters presented at your meeting had a distinctive regional flavor and the conference itself had the cozy feel of an

extended family reunion. You draw those geographers who may not always make it to the national meetings – K-12 teachers, "stand alone" geographers in non-geography programs, employees in the local and state governments, private consultants, and retired geographers. At your business meeting I learned how, in the face of shrinking travel budgets, your divisional leadership sometimes has to struggle to keep up meeting participation and attendance. With or without the participation of the major Ph.D. departments in your region, however, you succeed in holding an academically stimulating conference each year. Over the years, regional divisions have served as incubators for AAG leadership, so through your engagement in your region you represent for the future of the discipline.

From those that attended the San Francisco annual meeting:

Your numbers are growing every year! It also seems to me that collectively you are becoming younger and more ethnically diverse. Nearly one in four of you hailed from outside of the United States – your participation makes the AAG a truly international organization! Your excitement and engagement with the discipline was infectious and contributed to making this meeting one of the most intellectually vibrant and socially stimulating ones that I have attended. You shared with me your concern that as our meetings get larger there are more session conflicts and more sessions that are poorly attended. You worry that, as our numbers grow, we might lose the sense of community that we cherish so much at our meetings. I and others on Council share this concern and are already discussing ways in which we can address it.

From Doug Richardson and the AAG staff:

From you I learned how a small group of talented and dedicated individuals led by a director with vision and energy can, in a very short time, bring a scholarly organization to a position of financial security and intellectual vibrancy. The knowledge that our association is strong and in good health has in turn stimulated a broad sense of optimism and confidence about the discipline and its future. Until I joined the Council, I

assumed that your main work was to plan for the annual meeting and publish our journals. Working with you I realized the incredible range of activities in which the AAG is involved: promoting geography education at the K-12 and university levels, holding specialty conferences, building international partnerships, monitoring federal legislation relevant to geography, and communicating what geographers do to policy makers.

I also learned, however, how much you depend on the participation of AAG members to be active partners on many of these projects, and ultimately that the AAG is us – your office and the membership working together to advance geography.

From the many, many AAG members with whom I interacted over the past year:

Whether you contacted me to volunteer your time on a committee, to thank the AAG for a job well done, or to express your concern or even vent about an issue – from you I learned that AAG members feel a real ownership of the AAG and deeply care about the way in which the association represents them. And although some of you do have legitimate concerns about the future of geography at your university, the overwhelming mood I sensed from our discussions was one of optimism and excitement about the future of geography. You encounter more and more students who want to major in geography, experience an increasing demand on your instructional and research resources, and witness a growth in collaborative opportunities for geographers. Thanks to your efforts, we are at a historic high in the number of geography degrees awarded in the United States.

Most of all I have learned what can be possible when you have a talented and dedicated membership working in collaboration with motivated professionals in the central office to advance a beloved discipline. I thank you for giving me the privilege of serving as AAG president at this extraordinary time. ■

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