



# Geography in the Americas

AAG Advancing International  
Research and Collaboration  
and the AAMIGA Project



**AAG**

ASSOCIATION of  
AMERICAN GEOGRAPHERS

[www.aag.org/americas](http://www.aag.org/americas)

## WHY INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION?

As producers of knowledge in a globalized society, scientists and scholars must reckon with a world where economies are increasingly connected, where country boundaries are ever-shifting, where communication technology enables information to traverse the globe with great speed, where workplaces are increasingly internationally distributed, and where cities and towns are growing in ethnic and racial diversity. These phenomena impact the activities of knowledge producing enterprises, a fact which has prompted research-oriented organizations such as universities, R&D business, and federal agencies to promote international research collaboration (IRC) as a means to build intellectual capacity and increase competitiveness.

Leaders in academe agree that IRC as a concept is a worthy goal. The ability to initiate and sustain IRC over time is both a means and an indicator of increased competitiveness and creates value through the development of social capital. Indeed, faculty members with some experience with international collaboration view the practice as professionally important for themselves and educationally significant for their students and they see themselves as more capable researchers. For many, internationalization promises new theoretical constructs, new ways of doing research, the use of foreign data to test hypotheses, and the emergence of a global perspective.

## THE AAMIGA PROJECT

The AAMIGA Project, *Advancing Academe: A Multidimensional Investigation of Geography in the Americas*, systematically studied the dynamics of international research collaboration at local, regional, and hemispheric scales. The aim was to better understand the nature of IRC within a particular context, looking through the window of an “interdisciplinary discipline”, geography, onto a region, the Americas. The project itself was conducted as an internationally collaborative research project, by the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in Washington, DC, with funding from the US National Science Foundation, and in conjunction with the City of Knowledge in Panama. The results are being used to generate new mechanisms and enhance the quality of international research collaboration within the geography community.

## COLLABORATIONS BENEFIT FROM SUPPORT OF DEPARTMENTS AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

**The AAMIGA Project found that individual geographers are more likely to:**

- Receive funding for international collaborative research projects
- Receive funding for international conferences
- Offer international field courses
- Interact with international scholars or students
- Receive honors or awards for international research collaboration

**If their Departments:**

- Host visiting scholars and/or students
- Develop collaborative research agendas with international institutions
- Participate in global or regional scale projects/networks
- Allow release time to develop international research projects

**The AAG supports departments and geographers by:**

- Providing travel support to international scholars via the AAG Annual Meeting Enrichment Fund
- Publicizing funding programs available for international exchanges, such as the Fulbright Program
- Creating regional scale networks via online AAG e-communities
- Organizing scholarships for regional research and educational initiatives like the My Community, Our Earth projects in Central America / the US Gulf & Greater Caribbean
- Offering membership benefits at greatly reduced cost to eligible geographers in developing regions



Survey and data gathering efforts resulted in the collection of information on more than \$32 Million USD in currently funded collaborative international research projects among geographers of the Americas. The map above shows broad participation among countries of the hemisphere, with significant proportions of projects hosted in South America and Mexico (hosts indicated in red). International research collaboration does not always require funding; more than 10 percent of projects surveyed had no formal funding, with twice as many reported by US respondents as those from other regions. The median project size ranged from \$1,000 to \$10,000, irrespective of location in North America (Canada-US) or Latin America. Large projects of \$100,000 or more were equally represented among geographers in the North compared to those in Latin America.



## PROGRESS TOWARDS GREATER COLLABORATION AMONG GEOGRAPHERS OF THE AMERICAS

To facilitate international geographic collaborations in the Americas, the AAG has undertaken a significant set of integrated activity through the period of the AAMIGA project and beyond. These have included:

- 1) Organizing panels/ forums/ venues for explicitly discussing and facilitating international research collaboration at AAG Annual Meetings and other conferences, including the first official Spanish language session at an AAG meeting
- 2) Expanding the *AAG Guide to Geography Programs in North America* to become the *AAG Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas*, now with 18 Latin American Countries represented with no-cost listings; AAG designed and implemented a new online system to submit information that was launched in English, Spanish and Portuguese
- 3) Assisting with the dissemination of hard copies of geography journals to department libraries in need; especially through the online journals exchange program that has had the result of taking extensive sets of retired US geographers' collections to geography departments in Central America
- 4) Creating a new developing regions membership category that would provide the same benefits of AAG membership to individuals in lesser-income countries of the Americas at much reduced rates
- 5) Improving relationships and linkages with broad, multidisciplinary, scientific unions that work in the region, including the Third World Academy of Sciences, UNESCO, and the International Council of Scientific Organizations
- 6) Improving relationships and linkages with regional and national level geographic organizations and student groups, in part through the creation of a collaboratively-authored web space using wiki technology
- 7) Building AAG Staff capacity to undertake activities with respect to our growing international research collaborations, including now having personnel that speak Spanish, Portuguese, and French as well as other languages
- 8) Designing and developing broad-based external funding for regional projects, such as those under the My Community, Our Earth Partnership, with a total of AAG external funding for collaboration activities in the Americas during the AAMIGA project period exceeding \$325,000
- 9) Orienting existing association governance and mechanisms to better facilitate synergies around IRC, including the revamping of the AAG International Research and Scholarly Exchange Committee that now is comprised of *ex officio* positions of Chairs of all of the AAG Regional Specialty Groups
- 10) Extending welcoming messages to international geographers, in part by continuing and improving the AAG International Reception, an event receiving attendees on the opening day of the AAG Annual Meeting; publication of greater numbers of materials in other languages, including careers information, website information, and plans for regular translations into Spanish of abstracts of articles published in AAG journals, the *Annals* and the *Professional Geographer*; discussions of importance of international collaboration in columns in the AAG Newsletter by the AAG President, Executive Director, and staff; and other outreach activities.

### Best Practices for International Research Collaboration

#### Effective international research collaborations:

- **Recognize** that collaborations are dynamic and occur as processes over extended periods of time, often following a sequence of stages
- **Jointly establish** a common vision, purpose, goals, objectives and setting of the research agenda
- **Orient** its structure and activities appropriately to the nature of the collaboration, in recognition that collaborations vary by intensity, complexity and commitment
- **Build and maintain** relationships of mutual trust among participants in terms of authority, responsibility, transparency, accountability, decision-making and ownership
- **Foster** the existence and involvement of one or more "champions," i.e. individuals with credibility who promote the activity
- **Divide and share** responsibilities for decision-making, governance, project management, and research
- **Design** a flexible structure that produces new knowledge to continually challenge the project to revise their vision, that responds to formative evaluation results, that negotiates arising issues, and that adapts to new information
- **Monitor, document, and evaluate** the research process, its outcomes and the collaboration
- **Account** for how the motivations, needs, abilities, interests, skills, and "positionality" of each researcher may influence the nature of the collaboration, including the questions asked and methods used
- **Understand** the varied contexts of researchers as embedded within their particular national disciplinary traditions, histories, and trajectories as well as within their academic environment that has a unique organizational culture, institutional leadership, requirements, expectations, and system of incentives and rewards
- **Discover and utilize** a variety of effective modes and styles of communication for mutual benefit and developing networks
- **Take** advantage of diversity in conceptual and methodological orientations and incorporates issues of social importance to the South to improve the research process and outcomes
- **Lead** not only to transfers of existing knowledge among researchers, but also **facilitate** the creation of new knowledge and/or the production of synergistic solutions
- **Increase** research capacity and skills for all participants as a reciprocal and sustainable goal
- **Allocate** resources and rewards, including but not limited to funding, in an equitable and transparent manner
- **Clarify and manage** expectations about research outcomes, including publication of results, dissemination of results, applications of the results, and the sharing of intellectual property
- **Generate and execute** plans for longer-term sustainability

*\*Compiled from a review of literature, existing best practices (including the Swiss Principles) and AAMIGA study results.*



## A MODEL FOR PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES TO PROMOTE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Because the disciplines are the intellectual home of faculty members, disciplinary professional associations can play a central role in any effort to understand and enhance the international dimensions of academic research. However, previous research on IRC has focused primarily on two sets of actors, the individual scholar and universities or groups of institutions. This study's inclusion of the influence that disciplinary professional societies wield or potentially could bear upon facilitating productive IRC helps paint a more complete picture of the reward structures that may motivate, support, or promote it. Associations are also often at the forefront of specific research initiatives that are timely and inherently global or international in nature. Association arenas are highly flexible and can often be more responsive with rewards or recognition that may motivate IRC than the traditional higher education system, and as such, they may provide or may already be providing effective and relatively straightforward means of facilitating IRC. Additionally, professional societies that offer individual memberships can serve as an important mechanism for integrating scholars in a direct way into disciplinary communities, bypassing sometimes complicated bureaucracies at department, university or national levels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- Recognize the special role that professional and disciplinary societies can play for facilitating international research collaboration
- Consult and promote best practices to ensure mutual benefits and enhance the quality of collaborative relationships
- Facilitate linkages, communication, and effective networking
- Generate opportunities for institutions as well as individuals to participate independently
- Raise awareness and build capacity of all participants
- Co-sponsor forums for exchange at existing venues
- Organize multilaterally and synergistically



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