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Abstract: Geographic Collaboration in the Americas: Pathways and Prospects

Why should geographers collaborate beyond national borders? The question on its surface seems to answer itself: geographers are by definition interested in physical and human processes that connect people, places, and environments at local, regional, and international scales. International research collaboration by geographers, it would seem, is an essential practice for developing theoretical and methodological approaches for examining geographic phenomena at multiple scales of analysis. And given that the subject matter of geography is highly international in its focus, international collaboration also would seem to be a vital means for enhancing the quality of instruction in geography education.

Yet the reality of the situation is more complex. In a 2005 survey of its postsecondary faculty membership in the United States (Ray and Solem 2009), the AAG discovered that just under one-quarter (24.4%) of geography faculty were formally engaged with an international colleague in a teaching collaboration. In comparison, the proportion of geography faculty with a record of international research collaboration was more than double (57.3%) than those focused on instruction. That is an impressive proportion, yet as we shall discuss below what “counts” as an international research collaboration is highly variable.

What accounts for the lack of international collaboration in geographic teaching or research? Why do some geographers pursue international collaboration while others do not? When they do, what types of collaboration are they conducting? Are the reasons related to personal interest, professional need, institutional support, or some combination thereof? Seeking answers to these questions, the same AAG survey revealed that geography faculty members are more likely to practice international collaboration when the practice is perceived to enhance the quality of their academic practice. Another important factor is the degree to which individual geographers are plugged into professional networks extending to other countries. Departments and institutions, too, play an important role in facilitating geographic collaboration by creating a supportive campus climate that provides rewards, recognition, and resources for faculty to pursue international collaborative activities.

What, then, accounts for regional variance in patterns of international collaboration? In this chapter, we take stock of the status of geographic collaboration in the Americas and, through the use of case studies and the results of AAG research, illustrate how these practices enhance research and education in the discipline. We begin by situating our discussion in the research literature on international collaboration in higher education and what is known to further its reach and impact in academic disciplines. Drawing on the results of an NSF-funded study known as AAMIGA (Advancing Academe: A Multi-dimensional Investigation of Geography in the Americas) as well as international education projects by the AAG, we then document a broad range of international collaborations practiced by geographers in the Americas, noting how AAG programs and other mechanisms support each form of collaboration. The chapter concludes by identifying a series of challenges and opportunities that we argue must be considered in order for geographic collaboration in the Americas to reach its full potential and by presenting a set of recommendations stemming from AAG research for building on existing networks and resources to support and sustain work by geographers working together across the Americas.