AAG Urges New York Regents to Keep Geography Exam

On May 2, AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson sent a letter to the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Board of Regents urging the Regents to reject a departmental recommendation that would make the state’s global history and geography exam optional.

Under the Department’s proposal, New York high school students would be able to take an additional math, science, or vocational exam instead of the global history and geography exam as part of the requirements for graduating with a Regent’s Diploma. The Regent’s Diploma is the highest-level graduation certification in New York and is required for entrance into many colleges and universities.

John King, Commissioner of the NYSED, argued for the change by asserting, “It’s a really important step. There’s certainly going to be a lot of jobs in the future in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and this new pathway will encourage districts and schools to create additional opportunities for their students to pursue those areas.”

Richardson, however, pointed out the rapidly growing employment needs for students with geography and GIS backgrounds. “Students with a solid background in geography are able to think spatially and apply geographic analytical skills and technologies for decision-making and problem solving. The knowledge and skills acquired at the K-12 level in geography strongly complement and enhance what students learn in other school subjects, including science, math, and history.”

Richardson also sent the Regents a copy of the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education” (see related article below), which has been endorsed by four former U.S. Secretaries of State; thirteen incumbent governors of both parties; a number of prominent national organizations; several major corporations; and many others. The resolution underscores the need in the United States for geographically well-educated employees and citizens.

The Regents could vote on the testing issue as early as their June 18-19 meeting. Any changes made would apply to the cohort of freshmen entering New York high schools in September 2013. We will continue to monitor this issue and will report on significant developments in future issues of this column.

Major Corporations Endorse AAG Education Resolution

In recent weeks, several major corporations have signed onto the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education.” Microsoft, Nokia, Sprint Nextel, Nissan, and AOL have joined Google, Toyota, and Esri as endorsers. See www.aag.org/AAGEducation for the full resolution and complete list of endorsers.

The endorsements of these high-profile businesses is a testament to the U.S. Department of Labor’s identification of geotechnologies, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), photogrammetry, surveying, and remote sensing, as one of the three most important fields for high quality job growth with significant economic benefits.

We are grateful to each of these companies for their support and will continue to reach out to other businesses that utilize geography and geotechnologies in their products or operations in the hopes of receiving additional endorsements for the resolution.

AAG Member Jennings Testifies at House Hearing on Legislation Restricting GIS Procurements

Steve Jennings, a longtime AAG member and Associate Professor of Geography and Acting Chair of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, testified at a field hearing of the U.S. House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources on May 3 in Colorado Springs.

The hearing focused on H.R. 4233, the “Map it Once, Use it Many Times Act,” which was introduced in March by Congressman Doug Lamborn (R-CO). (Lamborn is Chairman of the Subcommittee and his district includes Colorado Springs.) As noted in my column last month, H.R. 4233 contains troubling provisions that could restrict the procurement of GIS and mapping services to specific types of private ‘firms’ and have a negative impact on geographers and GIS specialists, as well as on the Federal Government’s ability to meet growing needs for geographic data.

Jennings echoed this point of view in his testimony, which was endorsed by the AAG and the American Geosciences Institute, asserting:

I am concerned that the focus of H.R. 4233 on private sector could ultimately stifle innovation and jeopardize the development of a vibrant future geospatial workforce. Taken together, Titles II and III of the legislation require agency heads, “to the maximum extent possible,” to convert “geospatial activities performed by or for the Federal government” to performance by “private geospatial firms.”

This requirement would seemingly be contrary to free market principles in that it would limit or even preclude government funding for geospatial activities with researchers, college and university consortia, non-profit organizations, and/or other public entities. I am deeply troubled by this aspect of H.R. 4233. It is my sense . . . that if colleges and universities stop receiving federal funding for geospatial activities and there is no longer a place for geospatial scientists and experts outside of the private sector, the incentive for and ability of institutions of higher education to train the next generation of geospatial experts will be significantly diminished. This would be an especially troublesome development given the recent emphasis on the need to protect our nation’s competitiveness by enhancing education efforts in STEM fields, including geography and geospatial education.

It is ultimately in the best interest of the private sector to have a robust system of geospatial education at our nation’s leading colleges and universities because it will reduce the amount businesses will have to spend on research and training.

No votes were taken on the legislation during the hearing and we will continue to monitor any future developments.

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