

Healthy Departments, Healthy Discipline

Strong, healthy departments play a powerful role in the success of geography; a point driven home to me as a department chair and as an AAG councilor. And yet, geography departments are deeply influenced by the challenges facing higher education in contemporary times. As Duane Nellis puts it, many public universities have gone from being state-funded to state-assisted to state-located! Since geography departments are primarily in public universities we are feeling the effects of these enormous budgetary pressures on the public sector. Public universities have taken huge hits in the context of shrinking public budgets fueled by a political climate that is not friendly to public spending. In this context, public universities are in competition for public dollars with prisons, transportation, and K-12 schooling. Universities have responded by raising tuition, but this cannot continue unchecked without engendering other enormous costs in terms of the character of those universities. There are also substantial demographic pressures as faculty are retiring in large numbers; then because of financial pressures, open lines often do not automatically return to departments. In short, geography departments are working in a highly competitive environment and we must think constructively about how to thrive in these times.

The health of geography is a central concern of the AAG. Despite the fact that it is an individual member organization, almost all members passed through a geography department at some point in their careers and so the health and strength of geography departments is of great importance to the work of the AAG. To respond to these challenging times and recognizing the central role of geography departments in our professional formation and to the overall health of the discipline, I have developed an AAG Healthy Departments Initiative. A central component of this is a Healthy Departments Standing Committee that will work to strengthen geography programs by shar-

ing, developing, and disseminating materials and information of use to department heads; organizing workshops and other activities; providing recommendations of geographers who could serve effectively as site visitors or reviewers; and bringing to the attention of Council issues of importance to the health of geography departments. The committee will also provide a resource for departments in need of rapid input in response to challenges that arise. Committee members are currently Sarah Bednarz, Vicky Lawson (chair), Alexander Murphy, (with John Adams, Richard Marston, and Marie Price nominated to Council).

We kicked off this initiative in June of this year with an AAG Healthy Departments Workshop. Thirty-one leaders of geography, including department chairs, deans, provosts, and future leaders, came together to share visions, ideas and practical strategies for strengthening geography departments. We focused on strategies for positioning departments within their respective institutions by aligning with college and university missions, understanding the current political and budgetary climate and building strong relationships both inside and outside the university. Our wide-ranging discussions generated some key insights and advice.

First, don't be shy. Take the good news about geography and about your department to your administrators, deans, provosts, and presidents. They appreciate having talking points as they speak to outside audiences, give annual addresses and the like. Build relationships with administrators and be sure to communicate your successes in succinct and powerful ways. In these ways, the work of leading a department can be creative intellectual work as you build arguments about the importance and impact of various dimensions of the discipline. This work forces us

all to think hard about who we are, what we are doing, and the impacts of our work. Always be ready with some compelling examples that will be persuasive in your institutions—such as the Dept. of Labor identifying geospatial technologies of one of three areas of hottest U.S. job growth (see *Nature* January 22, 2004) or the *Rediscovering Geography* volume (National Academy of Sciences Press, 1997), which can be passed along to your dean with a note highlighting some key points relevant to your local situation. Meet with your dean to discuss the relevance and centrality of geography to your institution and community. Be ready to talk about some particularly high-impact geographic research (whether locally or in broader arenas)

or the successes of your graduates. Talk about the kinds of graduates you are producing and the impacts they are making, talk about our role in key issues of your place and time, such as economic development, sustainable cities, public policy, and so on. Spread the good news about the passion and excitement you have for geography and the concrete impacts of this discipline on students and the broader community.

Departmental culture and attitude are fundamental. Take the position with your colleagues that "...your success is our success" because healthy departments are indeed comprised of successful people in all arenas of our work. Build collegiality for its own sake, but also because it is crucial to our success. Deans and supporters of your program will respond to a constructive, can-do attitude. Stand for something, not against something and think about how you can create a culture of possibilities looking forward. Be thoughtful and proactive about nominating your faculty, staff, and students for visible awards on campus and beyond, and

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Register Now for GIScience 2004

Registration is now available online for GIScience 2004, co-sponsored by the AAG, NCGIA, UCGIS, and AGILE. It is a continuation of the successful GIScience 2000 and 2002 conferences, with over 300 researchers attending each time. The 2004 conference will again bring together scientists from academia, industry, and government to analyze progress and to explore new research directions. It will focus on emerging topics and basic research findings across all sectors of geographic information science. The conference program aims to attract

leading GIScience researchers from all fields to reflect the interdisciplinary breadth of GIScience, including cognitive science, computer science, engineering, geography, information science, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, social science, and statistics.

Keynote speakers for GIScience 2004 are Mark Gahegan, Pennsylvania State University; Lotfi Zadeh, Berkeley Initiative in Soft Computing, University of California, Berkeley; Ben Shneiderman, Human Computer Interaction Laboratory, University of Maryland; Jean Serra, Centre de

Morphologie Mathématique, Ecole des Mines de Paris; Liqiu Meng, Technical University of Munich; Michael Batty, Center for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College, London; and Peter Weiss, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/National Weather Service.

The conference will be held October 20-23, 2004, at the Inn and Conference Center, University of Maryland, close to Washington, DC. For more information or to register for the conference, visit www.giscience.org or www.aag.org/giscience2004/. ■

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representatives on issues such as funding for national geography education programs or for geographic research at NSF, USGS, and other federal agencies, as well as letter writing campaigns and other grassroots support activity at the federal, state, or local level on key geography issues.



Janice Monk to help lead AAG Senior Associates program.

While still in the formative stages, plans call for the Senior Associates initiative to be coordinated by a core leadership group that works closely with AAG headquarters staff to recruit Senior Associates, identify appropriate projects and tasks, and seek sources of funding to

cover AAG program administrative costs as well as honoraria and travel expenses for Associates. The initiative will seek to offer opportunities for meaningful engagement in AAG projects and programs by a roster of Senior Associate volunteers, and to provide honoraria, special recognition, and expenses support to participants in the program.

I am excited about this new program, and believe it will address genuine needs of both the AAG and senior geographers. I have asked Janice Monk and AAG Deputy Director Patricia Solís to work

with me to help coordinate the new AAG Senior Associates initiative as we get it up and running. If you would like more information on the program, have suggestions to share, or have an interest in participating in the program, please feel free to contact Jan at jmonk@email.arizona.edu, Patricia at psolis@aag.org, or me. Progress updates on activities of the new AAG Senior Associates program will be made available on the AAG Web site (www.aag.org/seniorassociates) and in the newsletter in the months ahead. ■

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promote and also genuinely celebrate the good work of your colleagues. Civil war is uniformly cited by deans as a reason for not investing in, and ultimately cutting a department.

Be strategic. Have a vision, a plan of action and be ready to put it out there. Engage in 'enlightened opportunism' or in other words, be able to see the ways in which your own goals can align with and support larger goals of the college and university. Departments that recognize opportunities, understand how they

complement larger goals (whether in assessment, curriculum reform, or enhancing enrollments) and seize them, are strong within their institutions. For example, geographers at the University of Oregon developed the *Atlas of Oregon* which has become a signature project, used widely by administrators to promote the university. Many departments have become central players on their campuses in geospatial technologies and others have highlighted their contributions to global studies.

Finally, the work of creating healthy departments should not be left solely in the hands of department chairs; we all must contribute through our service, teaching and research and the ways in which we communicate to our audiences. I believe that it is also work that the AAG can contribute to in important ways and I invite you to join me in this effort. ■

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