



American Association of Geographers

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MEMORANDUM

TO: SG Chairs and Membership
FROM: AAG Council
DATE: September 30, 2020
RE: SG Chair Open Letter from September 14

Every AAG member has a right to fair treatment, transparency, and accountability from staff, members, and the Council. And so, we thank the Specialty Group chairs who penned an open [letter to the AAG Council](#) on September 14, 2020, and we appreciate your call for transparency and accountability. We apologize sincerely for the mistakes, missteps, and misunderstandings that our recent actions have caused the communities we are trying to support.

The last nine months have brought unprecedented challenges to our personal and professional worlds. The AAG mounted a virtual meeting after canceling its first in-person Annual Meeting since WWII, provided full refunds or transfers to every registrant, designed and launched new, COVID-19 rapid-response programs to aid members during the pandemic. We also began to pull together a task force charged with crafting a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Strategic Plan that tackles the most pressing diversity and justice issues at the AAG and higher education. We do all these things in service to our members and the discipline of geography while acknowledging areas where the work must continue or where our efforts fall short.

Indeed, to have any chance at success, we know that we need to be willing to make mistakes and to stumble at times. We also know that the work will never be done, that our commitment to re-examining our past can never waver, and that the hard work in the service of positive change is everlasting. Underlying many of the concerns and specific questions raised in the letter are issues and problems that will require far more time and dedication than just these past summer months to address and to overcome. We hope you will continue to observe our good-faith efforts to develop and implement programs designed to combat these systemic challenges.

Your open letter primarily asks questions about AAG's past and ongoing response to COVID-19 and our efforts to support diversity within our association, geography, and society. In this response, we give some background on each area and attempt to clarify questions and concerns raised in your letter.

COVID-19 Rapid Response - History and Process

As AAG Council, we are determined to help members cope with the challenges of COVID-19, and therefore we established the COVID-19 Rapid Response Task Force. The Task Force was composed of a Steering Committee to oversee the process, five Subcommittees to generate rapid response proposals, and a Blue Ribbon Panel to rank and recommend proposals for funding. On April 24th, we put out a call for Task Force volunteers, and more than a hundred AAG members answered the call. The Steering Committee then worked with Task Force chairs to impanel the Subcommittees and the Blue Ribbon Panel, drawing on volunteers, AAG Fellows, and recruits from a broad range of backgrounds, institutions, and research areas.

Over the next six weeks, the Subcommittees generated 34 rapid response proposals and submitted them for review by the Blue Ribbon Panel. Subcommittees focused on different aspects of the AAG: members, students, regions, departments, and a cross-cutting group focused on technology. Since we knew that only some proposals could reasonably be funded and implemented, we asked the Blue Ribbon Panel to rank proposals in terms of impact, feasibility, and cost. The Panel's recommendations were then presented and discussed by the full AAG Council in a special [Council meeting](#) on June 23rd. Of the 34 rapid response proposals, we approved 12, in whole or in part, and then combined synergistic proposals to arrive at the final list for implementation. At this special council meeting, we also approved a revised 2021 budget for the AAG to account for the heavy losses incurred from COVID-19 and the allocation of \$900,000 in COVID-19 rapid response funding from reserves. [Please see this document](#) for a full list of participants and funded proposals.

It is worth adding a few notes on funding and feasibility. At one of the COVID-19 volunteer subcommittee meetings, the figure of eight million dollars in available funds was erroneously mentioned by a member. This mistake was addressed by staff in a follow-up email to the group. Additionally, our decision to combine approved proposals during implementation, where possible, made rollout more manageable. To ensure that assistance to AAG members was made available rapidly, each program was initiated as soon as staff could launch a pilot of the approved program. AAG prioritized dispersing funds quickly over a perfect rollout, and we acknowledge and regret the greatly compressed timeline that made room for shortcomings.

COVID-19 Internship Assistance Program

The AAG staff, working with the Steering Committee as needed, was charged with implementing the approved programs. While the rollout of eight of the nine COVID-19 Rapid Response programs was proceeding apace, relatively smoothly, and garnering many positive responses, the Internship Assistance Program proved to be most challenging.

As initially proposed by the volunteer COVID-19 Regions subcommittee and recommended by the Blue Ribbon Panel, it was designed to bolster regional partnerships between academia and outside organizations by funding student internship opportunities that would otherwise go unpaid as a result of COVID-19 budget cuts. In its discussions, the Steering Committee felt that an additional focus on underrepresented student members would be in keeping with the Council's recent commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a result, the Steering Committee added complexity to the original proposal, charging AAG staff with including all these considerations in the program rollout.

The funding for the Internship Assistance Program was set at \$3,000 per semester per student by the Regions subcommittee that developed the proposal. Knowing this amount would be insufficient for

some students, especially for those who may be paying the majority of their college expenses, AAG staff added the option for students to request additional funding.

The approved implementation for the Internship Assistance Program relied on faculty within Regional Divisions and in certain Specialty Groups to identify opportunities for their students, connecting them to work partnerships. It also relied on volunteers to review applications. The Specialty Group chairs made clear that this would be an undue strain on their time, and we regret any implications that this was mandated or expected of them. Our intention was not to make them feel burdened with the responsibility, but rather to put the power of this program in the hands of our members. We apologize for our mistake.

The Specialty Group internship program offered students complimentary virtual registration to the Annual Meeting in light of the AAG's recent investments into the virtual conference experience. While this would be an introduction to the AAG membership experience for the student, the primary focus of this program as a whole is the internship experience. In short, allowing a student to get a snapshot of the Annual Meeting through virtual attendance leaves room in the projected budget to fund more internships.

The AAG Council agrees that trying to roll out a parallel internship assistance program through some Specialty Groups was well-intentioned but ultimately misguided. With this in mind, and accounting for the challenges of this program in general, the AAG will continue to pilot the internship assistance program through Regional Divisions and administer it through the Regions Task Force. After the first round of interns has completed the program, we will reassess the internship program, including how best to provide funding for students from underrepresented communities. We welcome input and feedback from the Specialty Group at any point in the process. Meanwhile, underrepresented students and members will be the priority and focus of the DEI Task Force. An important takeaway from the members' feedback on this internship program is the need to shift the work of enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion away from groups who are often disproportionately affected by and asked to volunteer on these short-term projects. Instead, we will delegate this charge to the new DEI Task Force.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force - Purpose and Process

The AAG has been working on diversity-related issues in various contexts for many years (e.g., Diversity Ambassadors, Aligned program, Annual Meeting sessions, etc.). While we have made steps in the right direction, there is a palpable sense that our past and current efforts are insufficient to meet the scope of the challenge before us. Indeed, the AAG Diversity and Inclusion (DI) Committee (formerly called the Enhancing Diversity Committee) proposed that the AAG hire a Diversity Officer. A suggestion echoed at the June 23rd special Council meeting.

The AAG has not yet hired any Diversity Officers. Before hiring new staff to "work on diversity," the AAG Council agreed on the importance of careful planning and organizational introspection. Without an organizational mandate, there is little hope of moving beyond discussion to meaningful action. Therefore, the AAG Council asked the Executive Director to create a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force (a working title), which would carry out a diversity and equity audit of the AAG and complete a draft DEI Strategic Plan by the 2021 Annual Meeting. The AAG will release a detailed description of the Task Force members and mandate, timeline, and key milestones before the November Council meeting.

Since then, the Executive Director has been in close contact with the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, especially its co-chairs. Members of this committee expressed eagerness to participate in the

process and helped form the structure of the DEI Task Force. Discussing the DEI Task Force in its earliest stages with key Specialty Group Chairs was intended to expand the voices on the team and invite the broadest possible range of feedback.

While the Executive Director was confident this Task Force would be more than capable of delivering the strategic plan, he was aware of the letter issued by the Black Geographies Specialty Group and the support it received from other SGs over the summer. He asked to join the upcoming meeting with the chairs of several diversity-related SGs to introduce the idea, and ultimately ensure as many perspectives as possible were included in the formulation of the DEI Task Force.

In this August 24th meeting, the Executive Director explained that the DEI Task Force was in the early stages of development and asked the group for their thoughts on how Specialty Groups could or should be included. As SG Chairs, you spoke to the challenges they currently face as non-tenured postdocs and students, suggesting that AAG should remunerate any additional time and service. The Executive Director acknowledged the challenge of serving on something like the DEI Task Force without the benefit of a tenured position. Since paying volunteers would set a potentially far-reaching precedent for all other committees and task forces, the Executive Director needed to consult the Council. Therefore, he added it to the November Council meeting agenda for further discussion by the body authorized to make those decisions.

The Council and the Executive Director are wholly committed to turning plans into action and writing a new chapter in the AAG's history of diversity and inclusion initiatives. We recognize that this is emotional labor for anyone who has encountered the real impacts of racism and discrimination in their lives. To ensure that our DEI Task Force discussions translate from ideas into reality, we have hired a consultant with proven expertise in crafting strategic plans for non-profit organizations—Michael Tey of [Teycon Group](#). His expertise will serve the DEI Task Force, the DI Committee, and the AAG Council and Executive Director in converting our intentions into concrete actions. Additional consultants with expertise in diversity, equity audits, and implementation may be required to complete the work of the Task Force.

In closing, we look forward to working closely with Specialty Groups and any other willing members to make the AAG the best it can be for geographers everywhere. We seek ways to incorporate and elevate your input and ideas without exacerbating already disproportionate burdens on time and labor. We know that at times the pace of change can be frustrating. And, we readily acknowledge that our ambition to develop so many programs quickly left us open to missteps. Again, we apologize sincerely for these mistakes and thank the Specialty Groups chairs for the open letter and call for transparency and accountability. Please know that our drive to make AAG the best possible organization for you, our members, remains undiminished.