



Challenges Facing the AAG

As most of you know, I have been asked to succeed Ron Abler as Executive Director of the AAG upon his retirement at the end of this year. Ron has done a fantastic job of leading the Association during the past thirteen years, and I will miss working with him on a daily basis, as will we all. He has provided extraordinary service to the Association.

Although I have worked together closely with many of you, I still have the future pleasure of meeting many other members, and consider this to be one of the great privileges of undertaking this job. By way of introduction to those of you I have not yet had an opportunity to meet, I thought I might share some initial—and still developing—thoughts about the challenges I see facing the AAG in the years immediately ahead, and outline my approaches to addressing them.

My reflections on the AAG's challenges and consequent priorities might be grouped into three overarching themes: Strengthening Academic Geography, Outreach, and Organizational Renewal. These thoughts are shared as a point of departure, not the end of a process, and through discussion with the council and membership, and in response to external events, they surely will evolve, as does our discipline itself and its needs.

STRENGTHENING ACADEMIC GEOGRAPHY

Support the Intellectual and Leadership Resources of the Discipline

To protect and enhance the disciplinary core of geography, it is essential that we plan for and respond to the needs of our academic and intellectual leadership. As executive director, I will make this a priority. I will work with the council and officers to support geography depart-

ment chairs with resources, training opportunities, summer institutes, fundraising seminars, and peer mentoring programs. I will support carefully thought out supplemental programs designed to develop fledgling



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geography programs, and to respond to the needs of threatened geography departments.

I encourage and will attempt to fund opportunities for our leading scholars to represent geography in multi-disciplinary venues, and recommend that we institute featured sessions at our own annual meetings for distinguished scholar presentations on core concepts and fundamental questions. I will also emphasize the recruitment and retention of top students, as this is key to the future of our discipline. I strongly support the publications committee in its continuing efforts to enhance the Association's scholarly publications. My overriding goal is to cultivate and reward excellence throughout our discipline, in teaching, research, and scholarship.

Develop Research Opportunities and Partnerships

The AAG should play a role in developing multi-institutional research programs and large-scale research projects for geographers. It should facilitate multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral research activities. I will maintain my extensive relationships with NSF, NRC and many federal and international agencies in order to nurture new research opportunities for geographers. We also need to cultivate ties with major foundations to increase our funding opportunities in this arena.

It is essential that the AAG embrace creative, substantive research across the full spectrum of our discipline, ranging from work rooted in social theory to that grounded in empirical science. My own view is that there is a rich vein of untapped potential for geography to be gained through the constructive integration and interaction of such divergent perspectives and approaches in our research.

Re-Establish Geography in the Elite Universities

We have an opportunity to build on the current higher profile of geography to restore geographers and geography programs to some of the nation's elite universities and colleges. I will continue the effort begun during Susan Cutter's AAG presidency to re-establish geography at Columbia, Michigan, Princeton, Yale and other elite schools. Geography can and should be a key component of a liberal education at these schools. The centrality of geography in understanding an increasingly complex and unstable world has been made all the more apparent during the past year; it is an essential part of any effort to address major questions in the international, environmental, and social justice arenas. We should also attempt to capitalize on the attractiveness and broad applicability of "geographic management systems" within the university and in society to make inroads at universities such as Penn and Harvard, which have top business schools.

Leverage the explosive growth in new geographic technologies for the benefit of the discipline.

New geographic technologies can catalyze research, scholarship, and teaching within geography, and enhance its standing within the university, without diminishing our traditional methods or fundamental core. We should continue to examine their potential for re-invigorating traditional areas of geographic research and teaching, such as regional studies. We should build and consolidate a leadership role for geog-

raphy in interdisciplinary studies involving GIScience and geographic technologies. If we don't, others will.

Engender Collegiality and Unity within the Discipline

I will emphasize unity, inclusion and the common ground within our discipline. We must learn to work effectively within groups with divergent viewpoints, and to focus on consensus building and inclusion of disparate perspectives. I believe strongly in maintaining respect, civility, courtesy, and honesty in all personal and business interactions.

OUTREACH

Support Minority Recruitment/Cultural Diversity Programs

The discipline needs to increase under-represented groups in geographic education, research and practice. I will actively and strongly support programs such as outreach, recruitment, mentoring, networking, curricula development, and others that enhance the role of under-represented groups in geography. I have a long and successful history of working closely with minority groups to create significant economic, social and educational benefits and opportunities. We need meaningful programs in this area that emphasize results, not reports.

Build on the Progress Achieved by the AAG Strategic Initiative

Approximately one year ago, the AAG established a Strategic Initiative to foster greater coordination and integration of public sector, private sector, and university geographic research, education, and applications. The Initiative began in earnest with a special meeting at the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC, in April, 2001, of forty key leaders in geography, drawn equally from each of these three sectors of the discipline.

In response to the subsequent broad-based encouragement it received from all

sectors, the AAG has undertaken the development of activities, funding, and partnerships along six "pathways" to help implement the Strategic Initiative. These include programs to undertake a more active role in geographic policy, foster research partnerships, develop web-based resources, raise the visibility and influence of geography, and increase the financial resources available for research and education in geography. Significant progress has been made to date in each of these areas. New partnerships and substantial funding have already resulted from this effort. As executive director, I will continue to build upon this progress.

Make Greater Use of the Talent and Resources of our Membership in Outreach

I will strive to utilize more broadly the talent and resources of our membership in representing geography and the AAG to other disciplines, federal committees and agencies, private firms, and international geographical networks. We should continue to involve our distinguished scholars in liaison with multidisciplinary scholarly associations and scientific meetings (e.g., AAAS, ACLS, etc.) on behalf of the AAG, and make greater use of student volunteers and interns in our daily operations. I am especially interested in finding more meaningful ways to engage the extraordinary experience and skills of our retired geographers in the AAG's on-going outreach and related programs.

ORGANIZATIONAL RENEWAL

Ensure the Financial Health of the AAG

This is a critical area of emphasis. An immediate goal is to establish a sound financial footing for the AAG. This process has already begun at the AAG under Ron Abler, and needs to be pursued comprehensively in all of our activities.

Workflow is being redesigned to be more efficient. *Cash flow* is being monitored more carefully. Costs of annual meetings are being controlled through more competitive bidding of services and active negotiations with vendors on price. Where affordable, technology is being upgraded to reduce labor costs. *Staff upgrading* is underway when attrition occurs to match evolving work requirements with skill levels necessary to efficiently complete the work.

Grants and contracts are being pursued to generate new revenue from non-traditional sources. Several of these new revenue streams have been developed already and will provide much needed funds to subsidize overhead costs and cover some staff time. We need to expand this effort greatly, and develop the internal *administrative infrastructure* (project management and accounting procedures, etc.) to handle these grants and contracts efficiently.

Most of our traditional revenue streams (membership, annual meeting, and publications) are flat or declining, while the costs of these operations continue to increase with inflation each year. Efforts to *increase our membership* are very important. However, even if these are quite successful (say, 1000 new members), this will still yield only moderate net income, given the cost of providing the services, recruiting the new members, etc. Still, it will help, and is also critical to the long-term health of the organization. I believe it is particularly important to emphasize recruitment of younger members, as we are an "aging" organization, and need to replenish the ranks with younger members. A sizable increase in membership could also be achieved by developing some modest services and publications focused on the burgeoning number of geographers in the private and public sectors. This prospect should be studied and, if desired by Council, a multi-year program to provide services, publications, and benefits focused on the needs of these geographers could be established.

Two areas in which near-term substantial increases in funds can be achieved should

be pursued as key goals. The first is *grants and contracts*, which also offers the best prospect for sustained, long-term growth in revenue and for growth of the organization. The second is the Centennial and Beyond Endowment program, discussed in more detail below. There is an urgent need for both of these programs; as AAG Executive Director I will give them high priority, and make them successful.

Improve AAG's Internal Management Systems, Methods and Procedures

Sound management is essential to achieving all of our goals at the AAG. With respect to the AAG office operations, I would do the following: Implement more structured management systems. Improve project accounting, personnel recruitment and training. Rationalize workflow and increase staff productivity. Implement matrix management to projects with cross-cutting activities. Introduce TQM concepts and practices. Integrate web-based e-commerce systems for on-line membership renewal, annual meeting registration, and AAG Guide production. Expand and update the AAG website, including its interactive administrative functions. Enhance technical skills of the staff to meet work requirements of current and future systems. Deliver quality member services on time and on budget. Exceed expectations of our membership in service delivery.

Focus and Support the AAG's Geographic Education Initiatives

The AAG has long played an important role in guiding geography education initiatives at all levels, ranging from K-12 teacher training to NSF research programs. I believe that the AAG should continue to be a leading participant in geography education activities at all levels. At the same time, I support current efforts to analyze the AAG's optimal niche relative to other educational efforts, to focus the Association's education-

al activities on what we do best, and to complement the educational activities of parallel organizations. The AAG should develop funding sufficient to cover the costs of on-going activities and to undertake a progressive, focused expansion of our educational programs.

Ensure the success of "Advancing Geography in Partnership with You: the AAG's Centennial and Beyond Endowment"

This is a goal to which we must give very high priority. This proposed fundraising effort is critical to the AAG's future, to its ability to sustain operations at a high level of service to the membership, and to enable it to initiate many new programs which are key to the vitality of the discipline. Such programs include support for geographic scholarship, education, teacher training, minority recruitment, leadership development, and other worthy goals, many of which are described above. The AAG Council has convened a committee to plan for and implement this multi-year campaign. The executive director must become actively involved in such an effort for it to succeed, and play a strong and effective leadership role in raising the funds for this important campaign.

I feel truly honored to have been asked to work with the AAG for the next few years as executive director. I firmly believe that we have before us a unique opportunity to create a far more central place for geography in both society and the university. I look forward to working together with each of you, across the full breadth of our discipline, to help build the AAG into a model organization and to advance geography on all fronts at this pivotal stage in its evolution. ■

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