

## A Very Promising Future

During the weeks immediately before the AAG Annual Meeting in Boston, I had two opportunities to take some looks at the future — and what I saw looked very, very good.

My first experience was participating in the South Dakota State Geography Convention. This event has been held in the early spring at South Dakota State University for 39 straight years. The two-day convention featured eight guest speakers, presentations by nine college students, a poster session, a geography bowl competition, an evening social hour, and a banquet. This year's convention also hosted the state geography bee, which brought hundreds of younger students and their parents to the student center on the SDSU campus.

The South Dakota State Geography Convention has a long-standing tradition, but it is not the product of seasoned faculty members. The convention is conducted by the Geography Club, a student organization, and club members proudly proclaim that their convention is the longest-running student-run geography conference in the nation. The students running this year's convention did an excellent job. Club President Nicole Siebrasse and her colleagues planned and conducted the convention effectively. Events were conducted on schedule, with cogent introductions and useful information provided at all times. Students gave talks that were thoughtful, well organized, and nicely illustrated. Many in attendance commented about how well the event was organized and conducted.

The South Dakota State Geography Convention helps give SDSU geographers a very strong sense of community. It encourages students there to connect with broader local, regional, and national networks. It also gives them experience at the kind of coordinated planning and operational teamwork that will be a valuable skill in many settings in the future. Seeing the way that the SDSU students rose to the challenge to conduct a first-rate convention is one reason why I am so positive about the future of geography.

A few days later, I had another glimpse of a positive future for our field when fellow NSF

Geography and Regional Science Program Directors Daniel Hammel, Kenneth Young, and I moderated the semi-annual GRS Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement (DDRI) Advisory Panel. Sixteen panel members drawn from all branches of our discipline and some related fields met to consider nearly 100 proposals from students at U.S. universities who were seeking up to \$12,000 to support costs directly related to their conduct of doctoral dissertation research.

The number of proposals was a record high for DDRI proposals considered by GRS in one round, but the increased number did not come at the expense of quality. On numerous occasions panel members said how interesting and exciting they found the projects, and they placed a majority of the proposals in categories that could justify funding by NSF. The major challenge for us as program directors will be to seek funding from other sources within NSF to enable us to support as many of the highest-ranked dissertation projects as possible.

Not long after the panel meeting ended, Ken, Dan, and I sat down and identified the reasons that we found so many of these proposals to be exciting. One thing that struck us was the wide range of topics to be studied. Because DDRI funds generally are used to cover field costs, data acquisition, and/or instrumentation, not all geographic subfields tend to seek support, but the breadth of topics that doctoral candidates wanted to explore was still significant. In addition to topic breadth, most students sought to conduct research that would enhance theoretical knowledge and also help one or more segments of society. Among major topics that different groups of students sought to explore were human health and well-being, energy supplies, environmental issues, resilience, and vulnerability.

Another noteworthy aspect of the proposals was the broad range of skills that individual students proposed to use. Research

projects using multiple methods have become far more common in geography and many other fields in recent decades, but the number of doctoral candidates who demonstrated the facility to use a range of different methods to conduct their dissertation research was especially impressive.

Many of the dissertation projects were planned for foreign locales, and in addition to their conceptual and methodological skills, a large number of these students also had learned to communicate in languages other than English. Many had also developed solid working collaborations with researchers and others in the countries where they planned to conduct their research.

The highest-ranked proposals came from a range of universities. The quality of many geography departments is readily evident in the high-quality proposals from many of their students, but a number of strong proposals come from students based in other fields or interdisciplinary programs. The prospects for geography being strengthened from outside as well as within therefore remain significant.

Over two decades of work at NSF, I've had the pleasure of recommending DDRI awards for hundreds of doctoral students. I long have thought that those awards give us the greatest "bang for the buck" of all of the awards we make. While they help conduct research that yields valuable new knowledge, they also provide support for the next generation of researchers at a critical time in their careers.

Looking back on the South Dakota State Geography Convention and the GRS DDRI panel, I feel that I have seen the future in the form of some outstanding students — and they make the future look very, very good. ■



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