

AAG Newsletter of the Association of American Geographers

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The AAG's Long Range Plan

Where should the AAG be a decade from now in terms of its goals, finances, capabilities, membership, and contributions to the advancement of geographic research and theory, geographic education, and geographic practice?

What is the future of the AAG in an increasingly digital world? How can the organization position itself to be a leader and innovator among peer organizations in terms of efficiency and delivery of membership services?

How can the AAG achieve and sustain financial stability that will be required to secure the AAG's future a decade from now? How will these resources be generated?

These are only a few of the questions faced by the AAG Long Range Strategic Planning Committee in the Fall of 2000 when it received its charge from the AAG Council and then-President Susan Cutter (AAG Newsletter, July 2000) to help shape a long range plan for the Association of American Geographers. The three-year planning process has now been completed, and a long range plan has been developed, reviewed, and formally adopted by the AAG Council this past month. The plan is not a fixed or inflexible document, but is intended to help guide the AAG's development and activities over the next decade, and to be reviewed and modified periodically as necessary. The discussion below, drawn from the long range plan, summarizes a few of the emerging trends that provide impetus for this important effort. The full text of the long range plan is available for review on the AAG website, at www.aag.org/LRPlan.

Why Strategic Planning?

Science and society rapidly are evolving toward the perspectives, methods, and technologies that have been associated with geography and geographers for centuries. An important challenge ahead is to position the discipline so that geographers, from across the full breadth of the discipline, can take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Strategic planning for any discipline must account for pervasive changes taking place in the structure of pedagogy and research. Broad socioeconomic forces, for instance, place greater demands on geography departments while simultaneously reducing public expenditures on higher education. To meet societal needs, disciplines are also embracing broad changes such as the restructuring of academic institutions to engage more diverse student bodies and expand continuing education and life-long learning. As part of the larger context, some of the dynamics underway in academe and society promise to have overarching implications for the discipline of geography, regardless of the specific responses taken by individual programs or the discipline at large. Examples of some of these changing contextual dynamics, outlined in greater detail in the Long Range Plan, include:

• **Increased importance of synthesis or integrated science, especially regarding human-environment systems**

Integration is a hallmark of geography and a paramount need of science. For centuries, geographers stood apart as disciplinary champions of scientific integration. Recently, their influence and broad societal forces have inspired a new corps of champions in many disciplines. Global environmental change science, earth system science, vulnerability science, and other labels capture a cluster of pedagogic and research approaches focused on synthesis or integrated science. Much, if not most, of this integration involves the coupling of human and environmental subsystems, viewed as an integrative whole. This emphasis is forging new centers, institutes and interdisciplinary degree-granting programs throughout private and public institutions. It is generating large inter-program research initiatives within the main federal



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and private agencies that direct and fund research and education. Integrated human-environment science is increasing in importance, opportunities, and formal programs that will continue to grow with or without geography at the helm. We must find ways to build on our strong disciplinary traditions in this area to establish and sustain a leadership role for geography in this broader movement.

• **Advances in geographic awareness and capability throughout society**

Modern geographic information systems (GIS), real-time interactive GPS/GIS technologies, and other recent advances in geography are impacting science and society profoundly. The implications for foreign policy, international relations, and global ethics are enormous. These geographic technologies are changing how governments and industries manage their operations; how ordinary people drive their cars, buy or sell land, and pay their taxes; how wars are fought; how goods are moved and businesses sited; how complex research is organized; and how voters vote. Served increasingly via the Internet, spatially explicit data and tools are democratizing access to and analysis of information of vital importance to citizens and decision makers at all levels of government.

Geographic technologies increasingly are employed throughout the physical and social sciences, providing research tools that enable fundamental new insights, much as the microscope and telescope did in previous centuries. However, the same core technology that enables the interactive real-time geographic management of thousands of moving and fixed objects in a complex transportation network can also be used to monitor individuals. The implications of this fact for social relations, civil liberties, privacy, and locational freedom will continue to generate important issues for geography and geographers, and for society at large. While geography does not “own” the revolutionary new geographic technologies developed during the past few decades, geographers have been prominent leaders in their creation and application from their inception to the present. It is essential for geography as an academic discipline and professional field to rise to the demands for intellectual leadership, education, training, and social responsibility that accompany the explosive growth of these transformative new geographic technologies.

• **Increased appreciation of the role of “place” within the social sciences and humanities**

For centuries, geography has been the home of place-based science and scholarship. Today, the role of place in explanation and understanding has gained substantial momentum due to greater access to geographic information and tools, increased recognition of complexity, and various imaginations and critical analyses in the humanities. The call for place-based analysis now rings widely from the sustainability sciences to post-modern humanist scholars. Though differing in their ultimate aims, these calls emphasize the need to situate the problems and processes in question within the space-time scales in which they operate in order to understand the variations in outcomes. Understanding such variation, in turn, facilitates an array of interests, from analytical perspectives seeking to deconstruct the “average” or offer insights from “different voices” to decision and policy making. The appreciation of place and region is now pan-disciplinary, and it is incumbent on geographers to provide continued leadership and insight.

Long Range Plan Recommendations

The above dynamics attest to the newfound relevance of geographical practice, research, and pedagogy, and hold significant promise for our discipline, and importance to society as a whole.

They do not, however, translate automatically into benefits that elevate the formal discipline of geography. Geographers and geographic institutions must strategically plan for and work harder than ever at this critical juncture to ensure that geography plays a central intellectual role in the larger evolving debates and movements in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, as well as within society at large. The opportunities and adversity confronting the discipline form only one of many springboards for the formulation of the numerous recommendations of the AAG’s Long Range Plan. These recommendations constitute the heart and substance of the AAG Plan, and are organized under five broad headings: (1) Advance geographic research and practices; (2) strengthen education and training in geography at all levels; (3) provide service and support to members; (4) promote geography within society at large; and (5) maintain organizational viability. The Plan’s spe-

cific recommendations are described in detail in the full plan, available on the AAG website. The AAG’s Long Range Plan was approved unanimously by AAG Council on 19 October 2003. For further information, I encourage you to refer to the full plan at www.aag.org/LRPlan, and welcome your thoughts and comments.

Committee Membership

Each of last four AAG Presidents served on the Long Range Strategic Planning Committee. The full committee membership included Tom Baerwald (National Science Foundation), Co-Chair; Susan Cutter (University of South Carolina), Co-Chair; Alexander Murphy (University of Oregon), Co-Chair; Barbara Buttenfield (University of Colorado, Boulder); Jerome Dobson (University of Kansas); Paul Frederic (University of Maine, Farmington); Carol Harden (University of Tennessee); John Kelmelis (U.S. Geological Survey); Harvey Miller (University of Utah); Ines Miyares (Hunter College, CUNY); Jan Monk (University of Arizona); Duane Nellis (West Virginia University); Douglas Richardson (Association of American Geographers); Joanna Regulska (Rutgers University); Ruth Shirey (Indiana University of Pennsylvania); Billie L. Turner II (Clark University); and Jennifer Wolch (University of Southern California).

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