

AAG Newsletter of the Association of American Geographers

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An Office of the Geographer in the U.S. Congress

Geographers have long complained that geography education is neglected in our schools, and that neither the public nor our national policy makers sufficiently appreciate the value of geographic insight and understanding in setting and implementing public policy. It is indeed a sad fact that geography, as a discipline, currently has very little presence on Capitol Hill. Advocates for funding of geography programs have been conspicuously absent during recent debates in Congress on major funding programs for education, such as the No Child Left Behind legislation.

How might this situation change if we could establish an Office of the Geographer in the U.S. Congress? Or if legislators understood the importance of geographic research and education to our nation and the world? What if we could develop an internal capability within the AAG to monitor federal policies and present geography's case to legislators? What if we had a permanent advocate for geography both in Congress and at the AAG as an ongoing part of the Congressional policy making process?

These are the dreams that have driven us to explore the possibilities for developing a new federal policy monitoring and advocacy initiative at the AAG. Most scholarly associations, ranging from history to chemistry and from math to anthropology, have long had well-developed capabilities to monitor and respond to Congressional activities affecting their disciplines.

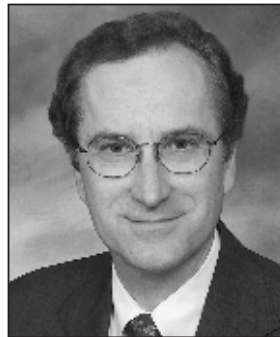
Given the near-perfect vacuum of effective representation for geography on Capitol Hill, establishing an internal capability at the AAG to represent the discipline on federal funding and legislative issues has become a bit of an obsessive focus for me during the past few years. After two years of effort, I am very pleased to report to the

membership today that we have now been successful in obtaining the necessary funding to establish a policy and lobbying capability at the AAG. We have received a major sustaining individual contribution, which combined with supplemental funding from GENIP (the Geography Education National Implementation Project) and from others, will finally enable the AAG to establish a full-time professional capacity to represent geography on legislative matters in Washington, DC. During the next few months, we will begin building and staffing this program at the AAG.

I believe that the AAG can achieve real results for geography with this new program, partly because the case for geography in today's world is so strong, and also because legislators themselves have such an inherent and direct need for geography. Elected representatives in Congress have a compelling need to know how proposed legislation will affect their Congressional districts and their respective constituents. They need to be able to rapidly assess the impact of federal policies on their regions, states, and local economies. Legislation introduced in the Senate and House as well as proposed federal agency regulations shape places and communities dramatically and differently across the country. Understanding the variable geographic effects of Congressional law and policy is critical for elected officials and for the citizens they represent.

The policy insights that geography offers, of course, reach well beyond spatial impact analysis. Geographers are learning more about the complex social and environmental problems faced by our society as we study human-environment interactions. We are gaining crucial perspectives on international affairs in every region of the world through fieldwork and international

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research. At a time when globalization, poverty, terrorism, and ethnic and religious conflicts are of worldwide concern, the regional and international knowledge of geographers is essential to understanding and addressing some of the most important issues that confront our nation and the world.

Geographers can also provide knowledge and guidance to policymakers as they consider the increasingly powerful geographic technologies used in business, government, and national defense. The resulting geographic issues, both scientific and social, are very broad and very central to our society, and will generate increasing legislative debate that will require the experience and insight of geographers. Sophisticated geographic management systems are also becoming core tools for decision-making and daily operations management within many federal and local governmental agencies. The growing importance of improving the geographic literacy among our youth in a globalized world will also underscore the need for policymakers to access the insights of geography as they create legislation for education. In these and many other areas, Congress could be better informed by sustained access to geographic knowledge and expertise.

In order to facilitate the exchange of information between geographic experts and Congressional representatives and staff, one long-term goal might be the creation of an Office of the Geographer in the U.S. Congress. The office might be physically housed in a Congressional building or alternatively in the Library of Congress. It ideally would be staffed by an accomplished and broadly trained senior geographer with demonstrated ability in linking research with policy issues, and supported by a staff experienced in geographic information systems and analysis, and with regional and international expertise. The value to geography (and, one would hope, to the nation and the world) of a permanent and on-going geography presence within Congress would be enormous.

As we begin our new policy monitoring initiative within the AAG, we must be disciplined and remain focused on a few key issue areas. Success in the legislative arena requires concerted, focused, and protracted effort. Considerable time and effort must also be devoted to laying a foundation for long-term effectiveness, through building

coalitions and developing our outreach and grassroots constituency capabilities.

With the June issue of the *AAG* Newsletter, we will begin a regular monthly column called the "AAG Washington Update," which will monitor and report to you on federal legislative activity that affects geography and geographers. This will also be available on the AAG website, updated as necessary to keep members informed of current legislative activity on Capitol Hill related to geography. The AAG Washington Update will monitor and track legislative activity of broad disciplinary interest, including education and research funding for geography, activity related to the Geographer of the Congress effort, geographic data issues, scientific freedom issues, and other key issues which are consistent with the AAG's Long Range Plan.

I look forward to working with you to help build an effective Washington, DC, presence for geography on Capitol Hill. This will not happen overnight, but we must begin the process. Geography has been neglected for too long in this important arena.

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