

## AAG Newsletter of the Association of American Geographers

Douglas Richardson, Publisher  
and Managing Editor

Megan D. Nortrup,  
Editor

AAG Voice 202-234-1450

AAG Fax 202-234-2744

newsletter@aag.org

www.aag.org

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## AAG Offers New Services To Support Specialty Groups

AAG Specialty Groups have been controversial entities within the AAG since their inception a few decades ago. Some geographers maintain that the proliferation of specialty groups (SGs) fragments the unity and integrative spirit that should be geography, while others see a clear need to provide a home within a home for our geographic special interests, or at least a "room of one's own" within the big home of geography that is the AAG.

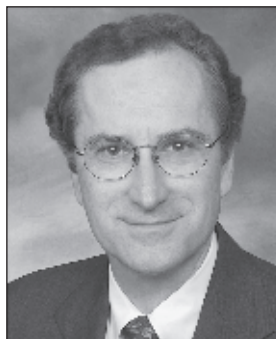
What is undeniable, however, is the popularity of specialty groups—at last count they total fifty-four in number—and the critical role they now play in helping to organize the program at our annual meetings. Over half of the paper sessions presented at our recent annual meetings were organized and submitted by AAG Specialty Groups.

It has also become clear to me, after attending a few specialty group chair meetings during the past two years, that despite the best efforts of everyone involved, the cumbersome procedures and systems in place for administration of specialty groups are frustrating to all, are unnecessarily burdensome, and have simply not been functioning efficiently or meeting the needs of either the specialty group chairs or the AAG staff involved. Consequently, I and others at the AAG have been gathering information from specialty group chairs, and working on ways to improve this situation over the past year.

As a result, beginning this month, the AAG will begin implementing several new computerized and online services for use by all AAG Specialty Groups, designed to streamline SG reporting requirements, provide automated updating of SG membership and list-serve information, and

create an online communications environment for SGs to use for managing their operations and communicating with their membership. As part of this new program, the AAG will:

1. Provide and host free list-serves for all AAG Specialty Groups. Included in this service will be several other advanced "e-communities" communication services (e.g., chat rooms, etc.)
2. Provide automated, near real-time updating of SG list-serves to all specialty groups.
3. Handle the accounting, check-writing, and book-keeping services at no charge for any SG that wishes to use this service.



Richardson

4. Create a new online interactive "SG Administrators Only" Web page to enable SG chairs to update the SG officer and contact information, upload annual reports or financial information easily and quickly online, and post short messages to visitors to the Web site.

5. Create a new AAG Specialty Group page on the AAG Web site that will provide summary information about all AAG Specialty Groups, including the SG mission, updated officers and contact information, a link directly to the SG Web site (if it has one), and to the most recent SG annual report.

We have just invested in two new software modules, which will integrate with the larger core online membership database system that we have been developing over the past few years, to make it possible to offer these new services at a reasonable cost to the AAG and at no cost to all fifty-four of the specialty groups. There is still some minor custom programming we need to do, and installation, configuration and testing work still to

*Continued on page 4*

complete on the full system before we can go live with it, which we expect to do this month (October).

Please let us know your thoughts as we implement these new services, and in the meantime keep on developing those specialty group sessions for the annual meeting in Denver. The deadline for submission of abstracts for specialty group-organized sessions is October 21, 2004. As a former chair of two AAG Specialty Groups, I know how much advance planning and work goes Meridian column from page 2 into organizing quality sessions for your specialty groups. Hopefully, after we implement the new services and procedures listed above, you will be able to spend more time on substantive matters in your SG, and less time on bureaucracy.

We have a great meeting taking shape for Denver, and your participation will make it even better. Regarding the ongoing controversy about the role of specialty groups in the AAG, perhaps moderation is the best course. Specialty groups play a vital role in the AAG and in the discipline. But we now have fifty-four specialty groups. Some overlap with others, and a few are splinter groups with little rationale based on subject matter. Consolidation rather than division or duplication may be a better course for some specialty groups in the future. Let's have strong and active specialty groups, but let's not have 100 of them.

Doug Richardson  
drichardson@aag.org