

AAG Newsletter
of the
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Building the AAG's Capacity to Respond Quickly

Within hours of Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans, many in the AAG realized that our response needed to go beyond the academic. Although the AAG is neither a government agency nor a disaster relief organization, it was clear that we needed to find ways to help immediately—ways that went beyond the analysis and critique which would surely come later. With little past history to guide us, the AAG staff began by organizing an online clearinghouse. We wanted to create a means by which departments and individuals in the affected regions could send requests for needed items or services, and by which they could make contact with colleagues interested in helping. The

AAG also established a special fund which will go toward the rebuilding of departments and assisting others in the hardest-hit areas. Very shortly, expressions of support, both moral and tangible, came pouring in from across the U.S. as well as from other countries, including France and Mexico.

Now that we are out of the initial emergency phase of this effort, we have shifted the AAG Hurricane Katrina Clearinghouse from an email notification system to a query access system. I would like to thank all the AAG members who responded, and also particularly the AAG staff, many of whom worked straight through their Labor Day weekend to create, maintain, and staff the online clearinghouse and communication network during the critical first days of chaos after the storm. Many others also helped us to get the word out about the AAG Hurricane Katrina Clearinghouse. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, UCGIS, ESRI, AAAS, ACLS, and many others picked up the news of our early effort and made it known far and wide. As a result, similar clearinghouses soon began to appear within other scholarly associations and from other disciplines, often with programs that

seemed inspired by the AAG's early actions.

It also has been wonderful to see the high profile of geography during the past few weeks. Many geographers, including Michael Crutcher, Craig Colten, Susan Cutter, Bob Kates, Talbot Brooks, and Stephen Leatherman, to name only a few, published articles or were interviewed in media ranging from the *New York Times* to NBC News. The AAG also has been contacted by the House Science Committee, which is planning to hold hearings on social science issues related to the Katrina disaster. We have been asked to provide testimony on topics related to the hurricane's destruction and the governmental response to it.

Appreciation from those most affected by the disaster and from the AAG's members more broadly for these efforts has been very heartening. One member wrote, "Thank you for your incredible efforts in swiftly structuring the AAG response to the Gulf Coast tragedy. Many of us want to help and the AAG clearinghouse/fund provides a focused way to do so." Another member from the directly affected region added, "I have never been prouder to be a geographer."

Critical to enabling this rapid response had been the behind-the-scenes effort of the past few years to build and strengthen the AAG's internal infrastructure and staffing capacity, including the organization's computer systems, Internet resources, management systems, staff development and training, and its financial foundation. Without this strong internal infrastructure in place, it would have been impossible to respond to this emergency so quickly. This same internal capacity now enables the AAG to respond not only to disasters, but also to opportunities or threats to the discipline of geography, effectively and on short notice.



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Yet a great deal still remains to be done, and as I write Hurricane Rita is approaching the Gulf Coast. As John Passerello noted when organizing a special session on Katrina for the upcoming AAG's Pacific Coast Division Regional Meeting, opportunities still exist for geographers to volunteer their services to help evacuees, to continue donating funds to help geography departments rebuild, to continue to assist evacuated geography students in other colleges and universities, and to continue to donate funds to non-profit emergency response organizations. There is a rich environment for the field of hazards geography to continue to assist local, state, and federal agencies understand and mitigate disaster threats. There are also questions concerning the long

term regional and economic development in the entire impacted area. What does the future hold for New Orleans, Biloxi, Gulfport, and all the small towns in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama? How should geographers approach massive rehabilitation of the region? These and other geographic issues and challenges will be discussed at several regional meetings this fall. In addition, numerous sessions at the AAG's Annual Meeting in Chicago will explore these questions and others, such as the nature of federal governmental response to this disaster, and issues of class, race, and the environment in responses to the Hurricane Katrina and Rita disasters.

Thanks again for your generous support of those geographers in need. We will

continue to operate the AAG Hurricane Katrina Clearinghouse site throughout the recovery phase of the disaster to assist geography departments in the Gulf region as necessary in the months ahead. To access the AAG Hurricane Katrina Clearinghouse, or to contribute to the recovery fund, please visit <http://www.aag.org/katrina>. Additional donations of materials, books, maps, equipment, services, and funds will be needed to help geographers and geography programs throughout the region rebuild for the future.

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