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Douglas Richardson, Publisher
and Managing Editor

Jim Ketchum, Editor

AAG Voice 202-234-1450

AAG Fax 202-234-2744

newsletter@aag.org

www.aag.org

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Future Research Directions at NSF

Have you ever wished you could affect the kind of research funded at the National Science Foundation? Now is your chance. Myron Gutmann, the Assistant Director of the NSF for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (SBE) will be soliciting ideas from AAG members at our Annual Meeting in Seattle, regarding new research directions at NSF. He will describe his NSF SBE 2020 initiative, designed to look forward 10 or even 20 years to frame innovative research for the year 2020 and beyond that will enhance fundamental knowledge and benefit society.

The social, behavioral, and economic sciences face extraordinary opportunities to address next-generation research challenges, notes Gutmann. This research landscape is complex, stretching across temporal and spatial dimensions and multiple levels of analysis – from studying the human brain to implications of decision making in a dynamic and fragmented yet interconnected world.

The special session with Myron Gutmann at the AAG Meeting is part of a process that will help NSF/SBE make plans to support future research. Related activities will include discussion of a report by the Directorate's Advisory Committee about the grand challenges facing the SBE sciences over the next decade, and recommendations from the Directorate's staff. The insights resulting from this process are expected to address the substance of future research, the capacities to pursue that research, and the infrastructure to enable investigations that will be increasingly interdisciplinary and international. It will involve multiple perspectives and intellectual frameworks, differing scales and contexts, and diverse approaches and methodologies.

As a first step in engaging the research community, NSF/SBE invited individuals and groups to contribute white papers outlining grand challenge questions that

are both foundational and "transformative." They should be foundational in the sense that they reflect deep issues that engage fundamental assumptions behind disciplinary research traditions and transformative because they seek to leverage current findings to unlock a new cycle of research. It is hoped they will contribute to a better understanding of the structure and development of science; provide context in terms of recent research results and current questions in the field; and indicate implications for future research within and across disciplines.

SBE has received 252 such white papers so far, and these papers are available online at: www.nsf.gov/sbe/sbe_2020/all.cfm. NSF/SBE plans to use these contributions and other input over the next year to assist in formulating plans that will guide its strategic scientific thinking.

Dr. Gutmann noted that "this is my first public presentation of the conclusions NSF has drawn from the white papers, which is a signal of the importance NSF places on geography and spatial sciences – and all the related areas represented at the AAG meeting – to NSF." His presentation and discussion at the AAG Annual Meeting will describe some of the research themes proposed to date, and will solicit your ideas regarding NSF's research agenda for the future. This is an excellent opportunity for geographers to participate in shaping research programs at the NSF, and I encourage you to attend this session to learn more about what currently is being considered, and to add your thoughts regarding how these agendas might best meet the needs of geographic research going forward. Myron Gutmann's plenary session will be held on Thursday, April 14 at noon, in Grand Ballroom B of the Sheraton Hotel. I look forward to seeing you there, and to discussing these significant questions with you and with NSF. ■



Richardson

Doug Richardson
(with input from Myron Gutmann)