The Interdisciplinary Opportunity

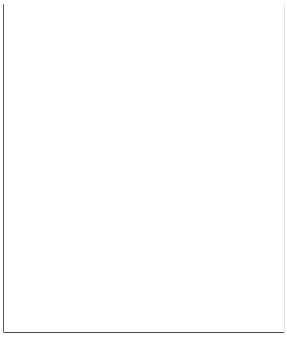
Over the years I've learned that two questions will invariably lead to lively discussion when one geographer asks them of another. The first is personal: "When did you first realize that you were a geographer?" That's a topic I'll gladly pursue with any AAG member on an individual basis in another setting.

The second question goes more to our professional core: "When you're asked by someone you've just met, 'What is geography?", what answer do you give?" In more than three decades as a geographer, I've often had to provide such a definition. My briefest response is to say that while other fields are defined by what they study, geographers can study anything. It's the questions that we ask that define us, with our initial question being some variant of *Where?* I've always loved the aphorism, "If you can map it, it's geography," because maps highlight the geographic dimension of whatever is portrayed. But finding answers to *Where?* questions is only the first phase of the discovery process, because we invariably follow with *Why?* and *How?* questions that yield deeper analysis and interpretation.

While *Where?* inquiries may be what distinguishes geography, the *Why?* and *How?* questions we follow with usually lead us into the topical domains of other fields. Pursuing answers to those questions often is best done in collaboration with scholars from those fields. Therein lies a great opportunity for geographers, especially as society and a broader range of users (as well as funders) call for deeper understandings of the complex ways that different aspects of our world interact with each other.

A speaker whose name I don't remember now uttered a very memorable line at a meeting at the National Science Foundation about 15 years ago: "Nature doesn't know or respect disciplinary boundaries." As a discipline that has never been topically bounded, geographers are in an excellent position to become involved and play key leadership roles in interdisciplinary research and educational efforts that increase knowledge and benefit society.

Many geographers have answered the call. The results of some recent interdisciplinary competitions at NSF highlight this fact. The 2007 Dynamics of Coupled Natural and Human Systems (CNH) competition are expected to result in twelve awards. Geographers are the lead investigators in three of these projects, and they are major participants in three other projects. At least five of the projects likely to be funded through this year's Human and Social Dynamics (HSD) competition have geographers in top leadership posts, and four of the supplements being made to broaden the involvement of social scientists in Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) sites will help support geographers. Geographers continue in top positions of more established interdisciplinary activities, such as the Decision Center for a Desert City at Arizona State University, a center focusing on decision making under uncertainty related to climate change. They also have been critical players in interdisciplinary education efforts, such as projects supported through the Integrated Graduate Education and Research Training (IGERT) competitions that NSF conducts.



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The success of these and other geographers as central participants in successful interdisciplinary projects should provide inspiration for others. Alas, the process of developing strong collaborative relationships with colleagues in other fields take more than zapping an e-mail message that asks, "Do you want to work with me?" At investigators meetings for HSD and other such competitions, researchers repeatedly talk about the challenges of building cross-directorate ties. Many cite the differences in jargon, paradigms, perspectives, and research techniques that must be confronted and brought into synch before the team can effectively work as a coherent unit. Others cite the realization that the cultures within which people from different fields operate may be markedly different. One observer commented that you stop allowing suspicion to be your initial reaction when a colleague does or says something that seems different to you. For some, the greatest challenge is simply finding colleagues from other fields who are interested in the same topics and issues as you are.

When I was nominated for the position of Vice President of the AAG more than 18 months ago, I stated that if elected, I would work to try to build interdisciplinary linkages between geographers and scholars in other disciplines. Over the coming year, I will devote a number of these columns to exploring topics and issues where geographers and researchers in complementary fields have worked effectively together for the benefit of both geography and the other fields. I invite AAG members who have been involved in successful collaborations or who know of others whose work provides good models to share their insights with me.

I have asked others to participate in this effort. Prior to our most recent annual meeting, I asked specialty group leaders to use that meeting as a forum to discuss with group members ways that they could help build stronger ties between geography and related disciplines. I encouraged them to think about organizing special sessions that would bring leading scholars from other fields to our meetings and enable geographers to interact with members of other scholarly societies at their meetings. I encouraged them to think about organizing workshops that would bring geographers together with scholars from other fields to explore topics of mutual interest, and I encouraged the submission of papers to journals serving geography, related disciplines, and broader multidisciplinary communities that explore geography's relationships with other disciplines and the complementary linkages we share with those fields.

Geography is an interdisciplinary discipline in its own right, but our capabilities can only be enhanced if we look to integrate ourselves more closely with the broadest possible range of fields with whom we share common interests. ■

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