

Succeeding in the Face of Success

If you just look at the numbers, you can't help but feel that the AAG annual meetings now are an enormous success. Only 30 years ago, Salt Lake City hosted the first AAG annual meeting to attract more than 2,000 registrants. Baltimore in 1989 and San Francisco in 1994 were the first to attract more than 3,000 and 4,000 participants, respectively. Not until our centennial meeting in Philadelphia in 2004 did more than 5,000 people register for an annual meeting. Much to our surprise, we discovered that while geographers liked 100th-anniversary parties, we enjoyed 101st, 102nd, and 103rd anniversary get-togethers even more. In the following years, Denver attracted more than 5,100 participants, Chicago had 5,617 registrants, and 6,901 people registered for last spring's gathering in San Francisco.

Despite this rapid growth in participation, some members expressed concerns regarding the annual meeting. There are too many concurrent sessions. There are too many poorly presented papers. It's too hard to find friends and colleagues you wanted to see. It's too difficult to keep track of everything that's going on. While I listened in sympathy, I kept asking myself, "If our meetings have so many problems, why do more and more people keep coming to them?" Another phrase that came to mind was, "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" But annual meetings don't keep running successfully on their own. A key reason your car may operate flawlessly is that you take it to the shop for regular maintenance and you take preventative actions before your trusty vehicle breaks down.

What makes our annual meetings so successful? The following reasons hold for a large share of those who participate:

- *It's a gathering place.* The AAG annual meeting is an event where you will meet many other geographers, including geographers from other nations. (More than 21 percent of those present in San Francisco came from nations other than the U.S.) Whether you're renewing contact with old grad school buddies or meeting new researchers whose interests align with your own,

the AAG annual meeting is an ideal place to cross paths with them.

- *It's a place to share.* The AAG has had an "open meeting" policy for about four decades. That policy ensures that all who have research, educational activities, or other items to share with their colleagues may do so. Although we limit participants to only one paper or poster presentation at each meeting, thousands of geographers still have the opportunity to share their experiences and insights with others and receive feedback from them.
- *It's a place for varied forms of interaction.* The ways we interact at annual meetings run the gamut from plenary sessions that attract 1,000 or more to small group discussions for groups as small as a half-dozen. Field trips provide another forum to interact with our colleagues, and geographers take great advantage of the opportunities for informal interactions in hotel lobbies, drinking places, restaurants, and other settings.

All of these pluses have been facilitated by effective and efficient organization. With Oscar Larson and Doug Richardson bearing major responsibilities but all members of the AAG Central Office staff spending enormous amounts of time working on meeting-related activities, AAG annual meetings are conducted in a consistently high-quality manner, even as their size and complexity continues to grow.

Countering these positive factors have been escalating pressures on time and space. The growth in participation meant that more than 4,000 individuals participated in our last meeting, with 65 concurrent sessions conducted 5 or 6 times per day over 4-1/2 days. That many meeting rooms won't be available in Boston. And because many participants can't devote five days to the

meeting, they miss sessions or people that they really want to see.

How can we take advantage of the positive aspects of our annual meeting while reducing less desirable aspects? One way is to use alternate session formats. Poster sessions are great for facilitating direct interaction with those most interested in what you have to present. If some time is necessary to speak to those in

attendance, consider illustrated papers, with brief presentations by all participants followed by an hour or so of informal discussion around posters, or interactive short papers, where short presentations are followed by up to an hour of discussion among the group as a whole or in smaller subgroups. Poster sessions can accommodate up to 30 participants in a

100-minute time period, while illustrated papers and interactive short papers can allow 8 to 12 presenters per session.

Other ways we might enhance the quality of our meetings is to involve more individuals in meaningful roles. If a set of sessions explore related topics, don't ask speakers from one session to be moderators or discussants in the others. Use those "supporting roles" to get others involved, especially early-career scholars. Emphasize quality over quantity in the development of sessions or other special events. Trying to organize as many sessions as possible is not a laudable goal. What organizers should look to do is to organize especially interesting and rewarding sessions that will pack the rooms where they are conducted.

The AAG Council will discuss ways to strengthen our annual meeting during our next council meeting in early November. If you have suggestions regarding ways to improve the annual meeting, please contact me and/or other members of Council. Thanks. ■



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