

## In Pursuit of Strategic Directions

**W**hen you're up to your derriere in alligators, it's hard to remember that the initial objective was to drain the swamp! Most of us have heard some variant of that phrase, and just as many probably have felt it applied to them on a number of occasions. We all live in a "just in time" world that seems to place increasing demands on us and force us to focus most of our attention on those tasks with the most pressing deadlines. When many near-term tasks demand our attention, it's difficult to take a wide-ranging, longer-term view. But an ability to periodically refocus from the most immediate tasks and examine the broader framework can be essential for longer-term success.

Strategic planning is a mechanism used to "take the long view," with a vision, mission, and objectives providing the framework for strategies that will help the organization attain its goals. Three times in recent decades, I have participated in long-range planning efforts by professional organizations, twice with the AAG and once with the National Council for Geographic Education. I recognize my bias, but I believe those planning efforts were critical to the evolution of the AAG and NCGE to be more effective vehicles for collective action by geographers and geographic educators.

The process of examining and shaping the longer-term prospects of something as wide ranging and amorphous as an entire discipline is far more challenging. A decade ago, a National Research Council study committee published *Rediscovering Geography: New Relevance for Science and Society*. This book was prepared by a 16-member committee chaired by Thomas Wilbanks. *Rediscovering Geography* argued for recognition of the growing importance of geography for scholarly inquiry, education, and practical use by decision makers and others. The book assessed the value of geographic approaches and perspectives and geography's contributions for scientific understanding and decision making. The book also offered a set of rec-

ommendations aimed at improving geographic understanding, literacy, and institutions. Sale of more than 17,000 copies of the book testified to its impact. (More information about *Rediscovering Geography* is accessible at [http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=4913#description](http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=4913#description).)

While many of the recommendations in *Rediscovering Geography* have been realized to some degree and overall trends for geography have continued to be positive over the last decade, the NRC's Geographical Sciences Committee has convened a new committee to undertake a major new study titled "Strategic Directions for the Geographical Sciences in the Next Decade." The new study committee's prospective chair is former AAG President Alexander Murphy, and the committee is expected to include about ten other members. Support for the committee has been provided by the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Geographic Society, and the AAG.

The Strategic Directions committee has been charged with conducting a strategic planning effort for the geographical sciences. The committee is expected to prepare a relatively short (60- to 80-page) report that will identify a limited number of priority research questions and directions that show how the geographical sciences can contribute to science and society in America over the next decade. The report should express and reflect the power of geographic inquiry, and it will be written so that it is readily understood by scholars beyond geography as well as policy makers, journalists, and the literate public.

In an effort to make the report as broadly representative as possible, the NRC tried to bring together members with a range of experience as well as topical breadth. To conduct its work, the committee will hold a series of meetings to review past statements

of strategic directions in geography and gather suggestions for questions and strategic directions from experts in all major sub-fields of geography and related disciplines. The committee also will solicit input from the all interested people and groups via a web-based questionnaire.

The Strategic Directions committee will incorporate the feedback it receives from all sources into a final group of strategic directions as well as recommendations regarding how to pursue those directions. The committee expects to conduct its work within 18 months. The final report of the committee will undergo external review and be published by the NRC. (More information about the committee, its membership, and its work is available at the committee's

website at <http://www8.nationalacademies.org/cp/projectview.aspx?key=48903>.)

To begin the process of engaging others in its work, the NRC Strategic Directions committee will sponsor a session at the AAG Annual Meeting in Boston. The meeting will be held on Thursday, April 17, at 3:10 PM in the Fairfield Room of the Marriott. Alexander Murphy will lead the session, where you can learn more about the study and hear presentations from invited speakers regarding a range of research questions that the committee will consider.

Based on the past record of major geographic studies conducted by study committees associated with the NRC Geographical Sciences Committee, the Strategic Directions committee will have a powerful impact on our field and the broader set of communities within which we operate. Take time to learn more about the committee, and begin now to make constructive contributions to its work. ■

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