

Strengthening Department Leadership: Sharing Strategies and Practice

At last spring's annual meeting I co-organized three panel discussions for department chairs, led the traditional chairs' lunch, and sat in on a number of other sessions focusing on similar issues. I was amazed by the rich discussions about strengthening and improving programs. Over the next few years I would like to increase these opportunities for sharing strategies and practice among department leaders, just as I have tried to improve professional development opportunities for early career faculty.

For this reason, I've co-organized a Chairs' Symposium for the Seattle meetings on "Making the Case for Geography" with the help of James W. Harrington, Jr., Audrey Kobayashi, David Lanegran, Alexander Murphy, and Nancy Wilkinson. This half-day session will focus on strategies for communicating geography's value to its varied audiences: university administrators, employers, students and their families, lawmakers, the media and the general public. Such communication is essential to building and sustaining strong programs as well as guarding against cutbacks in the current economic climate. To encourage the sharing of strategies and concerns, participants and panelists from many different types of colleges and universities will be included to promote wide-ranging discussion from multiple perspectives. The symposium will end with the traditional chairs' lunch. If we have a good turnout, I will organize another symposium in 2012 on a different theme.

I see this symposium as a complement to the continuing Department Leadership workshops begun by past president Vicky Lawson as part of her Healthy Departments Initiative and held each summer since 2003. These are 3-day workshops for all geographers interested in improving their programs—chairs, deans, associate chairs, academic advisers, provosts and other administrators—as well as faculty of any rank interested in leadership issues. It is particularly well-suited for individuals who have recently or will soon assume leadership positions within their depart-

ments. The workshop will be offered again this coming summer at the University of Colorado. The workshop will be held June 16-18, and registration is now open on the AAG website at www.aag.org. My hope is that a regular Chairs' Symposium will provide a means for workshop participants and others to extend and deepen their discussions by setting aside a special time in the annual meeting program to focus more attention on pressing issues.

I think there are many reasons to make more space for leadership issues at our meetings. Over the past 12-18 months, I've learned of plans to reorganize, merge, or close about eight geography programs in the U.S. and Canada. There is the chance that these threats will increase over the next few years as the shock of the current recession reverberates through higher education in the U.S. and other countries. I am particularly sensitive to this issue because, as I mentioned in my December column, the department where I earned my graduate degrees closed its program in the 1980s. I continue to wonder after all these years whether more attention to leadership might have prevented its closure.

For those who face such threats, a range of resources has already been developed as part of the Healthy Departments Initiative. These include papers on "Making the Case for Geography," "Being a Geographer in a Blended Department," and "Beyond the Department: Building Effective Relationships with Deans, Provosts, and Presidents" (www.aag.org/education/healthy_departments/resources). There is also the Healthy Departments committee, chaired currently by AAG past president Alec Murphy, which is willing to help departments and their leaders with letters of support, phone calls, and campus visits. So, if you think help or support is needed—now or sometime in the future—please get in touch with me, Alec Murphy, or Doug Richardson. We work carefully with department leaders

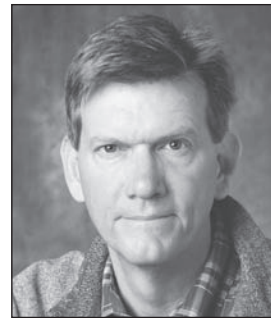
to offer the types of support they request within the context of their institutional missions and needs. Sometimes problems arise unexpectedly but, whenever possible, we encourage departments to think ahead; to anticipate possible challenges and opportunities; and to contact the Healthy Department committee now, rather than wait until problems have become acute.

For the moment I am most worried about the immediate threats posed by tight budgets. In the long run, better preparation of department leaders is essential to the health of our discipline.

Hoping people will learn the ropes on their own once they assume leadership positions isn't realistic. Equally important is seeing leadership as a team effort within a department, not just the responsibility of one or a few individuals. We also need to value the effort our colleagues invest in leadership roles. Such service is essential to the well-being of departments and the life of the discipline and shouldn't be seen as a burden to be shunned or shed as quickly as possible.

The more important point is that strengthening leadership is also a way to seize new opportunities. As I travelled around to AAG regional meetings this past fall I was impressed over and over again with the number of new initiatives underway including new degree and certificate programs; growing enrollment; the excellent placement of students; and even, in some cases, new faculty positions and research funding. So sharing strategies and practice can yield real dividends, both in safeguarding our many achievements and promoting innovation and change. ■

Ken Foote
k.foote@colorado.edu



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