

## Building Community, Changing Culture

I've appreciated all the feedback I've received on my columns over the past year, and I've tried in that short span to draw attention to one set of issues I see as vital to the future of our discipline. Certainly our contributions to science, scholarship, education, government, business, the environment and society will, in the long-run, be the marks of our success. But making such contributions will be more difficult if we don't nurture new talent, build community, cultivate leadership, promote improved educational and research practice, support innovation, and respond creatively to the changing demands of society. That is why I've focused so many of my columns this year on topics of professional development and leadership – issues I see as vital to sustaining and expanding geography's role in science and society.

I think we have already entered a period of tremendous opportunities and challenges for geography as was highlighted in last year's NRC report, *Understanding the Changing Planet: Strategic Directions for the Geographical Sciences*. This is especially true in higher education where we as a discipline will be faced with the impacts of globalization and the changing dynamics of the knowledge economy; the rapid evolution and deployment of learning technologies, especially for distance education; the rise of for-profit colleges and universities; changing public support for higher education and the general trends in political economy of higher education; the changing academic labor system; efforts to respond to and support the increasing demographic diversity of students and faculty; and increasing pressure for accountability in terms of learning outcomes, completion rates, time-to-degree, and other metrics. In light of these developments, I think there are two areas where we can continue to build momentum to address these challenges.

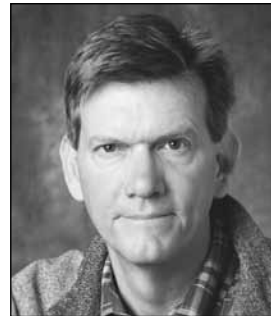
*Building community by looking beyond the department.* Responding effectively to changing trends in the economy, in science, and in scholarship will require, more than ever, working together as a discipline, rather than as single, isolated departments. I think much can be gained by sharing practice among departments and by building

collaborations within and across institutions. For example, how might we learn and build on the experiences of departments which have established successful certificate and professional masters programs? What about programs which have already embraced interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives? In Arizona, for example, there is already a School of Geography and Development (University of Arizona); a Department of Geography, Planning, Recreation (Northern Arizona University); and a School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning (Arizona State). Going further, might it be possible to build collaborations among these to create a national network of programs? How might we capitalize on the rapid growth of geography in community colleges, the rise in students taking AP human geography, and better coordinate online education in geography? How can we broaden efforts to support international faculty and graduate students within the discipline? What are best practices in terms of supporting and promoting contingent faculty? In part, this involves researching and sharing successful practice among AA/AS, BA/BS, MA/MS, and PhD programs, but it also means trying to avoid reinventing the wheel in dozens of different programs when solutions are already at hand.

Building community also means continuing to take a big-picture approach to geography as a discipline that naturally spans academic and professional worlds. Unlike many other disciplines, geography has a natural home in academe, business, government, education and the non-profit and NGO sectors. There continues to be much to be shared and learned among these sectors.

*Changing culture to respond to future opportunities and challenges.* As always the biggest hurdle to change is complacency. Certainly colleges and universities are among the most long-lived and resilient organizations in history, but their resiliency is based at least in part on their flexibility in adapting to social and economic change.

I think there are three areas where we can lead change and improve our culture to build more resilience and flexibility into our discipline.



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First, I think better preparation of department leaders is essential so that they are able to respond effectively to current and future opportunities and challenges. Hoping people will learn the ropes once they assume leadership positions isn't realistic, particularly given how important leadership positions are in terms of contributing to the well-being of departments and the life of the discipline.

Second, we should continue to consider ways of improving geography curricula and programs at all levels. I've pointed out in previous columns how much might be done to strengthen academic and professional training for doctoral students, but similar efforts need to be made, as I've noted above, with regard to certificate programs and professional masters programs. Equally important are innovations at the BA/BS and AA/AS levels, which need to receive more attention.

Finally, it is worth challenging – at least occasionally – some of the fundamental assumptions of our trade. As I look at some of the questions posed in *Understanding the Changing Planet*, I can't help but note how many will require large-scale, collaborative research efforts, yet most of our graduate education and professional practice is focused on promoting and rewarding individual research and accomplishment. Other taken-for-granted distinctions need to be questioned just as closely.

In a field as diverse as geography, it is important for everyone to participate in this questioning of current practice. Such efforts hold the potential to contribute to the vitality of the discipline and to open debate to a range of participants and perspectives which will strengthen and improve the discipline. ■

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