

## Geographers, Go Public

Among the benefits of being a geographer are the freedom to investigate a wide range of topics and opportunities to share spaces and thoughts with colleagues whose worlds and perspectives differ from our own. And, because most geographical research is on topics and at scales of inquiry that non-geographers can relate to, the knowledge and insights we contribute have the potential to be readily accessible and interesting, not only to our immediate colleagues, but also to public audiences, lay and professional. We make compelling cases for our own research topics when we seek funding, but if what we do is so very essential, why do we still, more often than not, need to explain what geographers do and what geography encompasses? Why is the breadth and depth of geography so often unknown outside of our own walls, and what can we do to change this situation?

We joke about being asked what geographers study after they finish learning the state capitals, at the same time recognizing that this question highlights an ongoing public relations challenge. One reason geography is less visible than some other academic disciplines is that our inherent interdisciplinarity obscures our profile. Nonetheless, we thrive on interdisciplinarity, so we must work harder to be visible. The historical development of academic disciplines and curricula in the U.S. in the K-12 system and at the collegiate level has left hurdles in the pathways for growth of academic geography at many of our institutions, and new hurdles appear when financial resources disappear. But have we also built our own hurdles? Are we collectively shy? Do many of us prefer being outside of the spotlight?

We generally launch our research results into the public domain by publishing in scholarly journals. That is important, but is it sufficient? As a group, we have tended toward professional modesty (with wonderful exceptions!), perhaps hoping to receive that phone

call from a major newspaper, TV channel, or other media outlet from a reporter who read the journal article and wants to tell the story of our research, or maybe from a staff person asking us to share our integrative perspective on a controversial issue with members of Congress.

When you think about it, publishing a research paper in a scientific journal can be like putting an unsolicited letter in a stranger's mailbox. If we really wanted our work to have a ripple effect, shouldn't we at least ring the doorbell? Or, better yet, make an appointment and engage the recipient in conversation? The key word here is "engage." If we don't engage with readers, thinkers, and actors beyond our own discipline and beyond the walls of our institutions, we face a future of having little influence in this world, about which we know so much. The desire to be more visible is the passive side of a coin; the flip side is active engagement.

The urgency for engaging more often and more actively with the broader population is heightened by our moment in history, when so much of what geographers study and teach directly relates to major issues confronting our society, and by the opportunity costs of remaining silent. At this moment, the mood of the United States, where most AAG members reside, is one of a growing sense of citizen responsibility and greater willingness to listen to new voices. This is no time to be quiet.

Where should we begin? First, I wholeheartedly echo Jennifer Barnes' call (Op-Ed column, page 11, *AAG Newsletter*, May 2009) for geographers to be more vocal in the national debate about climate change. Others of us are also well qualified to join, initiate, and/or lead discussions on such issues as the sustainability of resource use,

the spread of infectious disease, or the democratization of geographic information. A geographic perspective is basic to these issues and to many others, including those associated with immigration, natural hazards, cultural differences, and transportation problems.

The AAG is already actively engaged in many public arenas. Executive Director Doug Richardson and the talented AAG staff reach out to other disciplines, professional organizations, and continents. They monitor developments on Capitol Hill and lead efforts to advance the interests of professional geographers. Our *Annals* editors have begun to develop

an additional, themed issue per year, with the first three to be Geographies of Peace and Conflict, Climate Change, and Energy. The AAG staff offers us an excellent model of active engagement, but there are limits to the reach of a 20-person staff. If the additional 10,000+ of us engage with others outside our own ranks to share our knowledge and explore complex issues, we can have a far greater ripple effect and make great strides toward increasing the visibility and the voice of geography.

In the coming year, I challenge all of us to reflect on our societal roles as geographers and to take new steps to make geography and the work of geographers far more visible in the public domain. Not just to deliver our knowledge, but also to engage in broader conversations on important issues of our time. In an engagement, the conversation flows in two or more ways. We all stand to gain. ■

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**See pages 16-17 for the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting Call For Papers.**