

## Geographic Research and the National Academies

Even while each of us can make an impassioned case for the importance of our own research, we also recognize that certain topics, whether they are the ones we have chosen or not, have more direct social relevance, more immediately recognizable scientific or social merit, or more funding support than others. Beyond the urgent needs of people and places in crisis, the elegance of fine scholarship, the opportunities afforded by new technologies, and the disproportionate influence of squeaky wheels, have you ever wondered how certain topics rise to prominence? In the U.S., committees of the National Academies play an important role in this process.

The "National Academies," a private, non-profit organization chartered by Congress to advise the federal government on science, engineering, and medicine, provides a unique and influential link between researchers and national policy makers. Two of the four parts of the National Academies—the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the National Research Council (NRC)—directly involve and affect geographers. Having just completed a three-year term on the Geographical Sciences Committee of the NAS, I'd like to make sure that U.S. geographers recognize the importance of the National Academies in shaping research agendas.

The NAS, established in 1863 by President Lincoln, responds to requests for analysis from Congress and from other, primarily, but not exclusively, federal organizations. The NRC was created in 1916 as the research arm of the NAS. Science in the NAS is predominantly "hard" science, but some social science is included, and much, although not all, of the scope of geography is represented. Geography at NAS, like geography in libraries and in the job market, is not all in one place and not always labeled as geography. It primarily appears within the Division of Earth and Life Studies' Board of Earth Sciences and Resources, where two standing committees, Geographical Sciences (Will Graf, chair)

and Mapping Science (Keith Clarke, chair) respond to requests from Congress and other entities by developing proposals for expert studies. I encourage you to check out the composition and current projects of these committees ([www.nas.edu](http://www.nas.edu)). Also informative are the short articles by W. Graf in *Directions Magazine* (2003) and B.L. Turner II in the *Professional Geographer* (57(3): 462–7, 2005).

After they have been approved and funded, the expert studies are carried out by ad hoc committees of the NRC, which exist from several months to several years and are composed of experts (that's us) from academia and the private sector. These committees typically analyze the state of knowledge on the specified topic, develop recommendations, and produce a peer-reviewed monograph ([www.nationalacademies.org/publications](http://www.nationalacademies.org/publications)). NRC committees respond to different types of requests. Some committees are explicitly asked to recommend research agendas and many committees identify research needs in their recommendations. NRC recommendations are influential in directing federal research funding. Those of us on the outside can strengthen a grant proposal or a journal article by citing pertinent NRC committee recommendations.

Agenda-setting studies closely related to geography have included "The Future of Spatial Data and Society" (1997), "Research Opportunities in Geography at the USGS" (2002), "Beyond Mapping: Meeting National Needs Through Enhanced GIS" (2006), and "Landscapes on the Edge: New Horizons for Research on Earth's Surface" (2009). Geographers have been involved in numerous other NRC reports, on topics such as transportation, energy, climate change, mapping, and disaster risk.

One current NRC committee, populated primarily by geographers, is completing a report entitled "Strategic Directions for

the Geographical Sciences in the Next Decade." Its charge was to formulate a short list of high priority geographical research questions relevant to societal needs. You may recall that this committee (Alec Murphy, chair) sought input from all of us at the Boston AAG meeting or

as written statements afterward. If you missed those opportunities, watch for future ones from other NRC committees—such calls are our chance to add our voices to these debates. "Strategic Directions" is expected to be completed in spring 2010.

If you're invited to serve on an NRC ad hoc committee, try to say "yes." Such invitations follow careful deliberation about potential committee composition. Yes, it is volunteer service; yes, committee members are people who already have full lives; and yes, the work can be challenging; but this is a rare opportunity to contribute directly to policy or, if it is the stated task, to help define a research agenda.

NRC committees are not the only agenda-setting arena for geographers, and, given the breadth of our discipline, an agenda set by an NRC committee will not pertain to all geographers. Nonetheless, all geographers should be aware of the contributions of geographers on committees of the National Academies and recognize the importance of their recommendations to federal agencies.

Some of us will launch independent research; others will pursue themes already recognized as high priority. All of us can monitor the pulse of the broader community of U.S. science by paying attention to the activities of geographers at the National Academies. Moreover, we should join those activities as opportunities arise. ■



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