

Geography is Vital

This is my final column before passing the pen to Ken Foote, who will become AAG President on July 1. I began the year with a call for geographers to more visibly engage in key issues of our time, and you have responded with wonderful examples of creativity, leadership, and effort toward that goal. Keep up the good work!

This year, national and international crises—devastating earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and China, oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, the vulnerability of air traffic to volcanic ash, weak links in the global economy, and conflicts across the globe—have reminded us of the importance of understanding the interactions of natural and human systems, anticipating the unexpected, and planning for sustainable, long-term futures in dynamic landscapes. We have ever-increasing opportunity to apply our knowledge, tools, and contacts to these crises and other issues of societal importance.

Ours is an essential field of study and knowledge, and there is vitality in our growth, our energy, our creativity, and our intellectual capital. There is also great vitality in the next wave of geographers, those who are now students. One of the highlights of my year as AAG president has been the opportunity, particularly at regional meetings, to hear and see the work of students and to talk to them about their projects and aspirations. The future of geography looks promising indeed!

The AAG as an organization has amazing vitality, too. I've frequently heard geographers refer to the AAG as a meeting (as in, "I'm going to AAG"), but, of course, the AAG is a dynamic, professional organization with many other activities besides the annual meeting (which, by itself, is no small feat, as this year's meeting set a new record of over 8,000 attendees). Much of the work done by AAG staff members is supported by the competitive grants they obtain to advance geography in science, education,

and the public arena. If you weren't already aware of these activities, you might be surprised to learn that the AAG received more funds in grants and contracts than in dues last year.

The list of recent and current AAG projects and proposals pending is truly remarkable in scope and far too long to include here. When you see projects described, one by one, in this newsletter, you probably don't realize how many of them are active concurrently. Projects funded by NSF, USAID, NASA, AAAS, IDB, NEH, NIH, and various foundations are building a digital social science library, developing graduate ethics seminars for future geospatial technology professionals, teaching about global climate change, and enhancing graduate education in geography. They are also using geospatial technologies for biodiversity in Africa, creating a historical GIS clearinghouse, enhancing diversity, establishing conservation priorities in the neotropics, developing GIS&T cyberinfrastructure for innovation and economic development, and increasing the capacity of agencies to manage and use spatial data. This partial list begins to convey the excitement of the organization and the essential roles of geography in today's world, not to mention a glimpse of a very capable staff.

This has been a good year for academic geography, in spite of the economy. Geography departments are holding their own and some (e.g., Cincinnati, Saginaw State) are even growing. Most importantly, the value of a degree in geography has strengthened as job opportunities for geographers outside academia have continued to increase. For example, I have recently received a number of announcements for geographically related jobs. They included applying GIS skills to the oil spill in the Gulf

of Mexico, assisting with the U.S. Census, developing projects for a center for watershed solutions, and conducting fieldwork related to the Clean Water Act. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. At the East Lakes regional division meeting last fall, we were stunned and inspired to hear the number of

geographical and geospatial jobs that would be coming open over the next few years in the national security sector (thousands!), due both to increased attention to security and to retirements in the workforce.

As a parting thought, I'd like to share a favorite mountaineering quotation, from René Daumal's *Mount Analog* (1960):



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"You cannot stay on the summit forever. You have to come down again so why bother in the first place? Just this: what is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above... There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know."

Seeing the landscape from a high peak or viewing Earth from space provides a broader view of the world than one would have otherwise. Similarly, participation at the national level of our discipline—in specialty groups, on committees, and/or in leadership positions—offers new views of connections, challenges, and opportunities. I encourage you to engage, at least occasionally, at the national level, to contribute your talents, make a difference, and gain new perspectives. ■

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The 2011 AAG Annual Meeting will be held in Seattle, April 12-16. See page 1 for more on the region.