

An AAG Mission for the Twenty-first Century

It is a truism to say that the mission and scope of any organization is a product of its own history. The AAG was formed to advance the discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when professional geography (like many other academic disciplines) was seeking to consolidate and advance its position in government, private, and educational circles. Reflecting this early mission, the Association described its purpose in the following manner (and this still appears in our *Guide to Geography Programs in North America*), "The Association of American Geographers is a scholarly, nonprofit organization founded in 1904 to advance professional studies in geography and to encourage the application of geographic research in business, education and government." In the AAG constitution, this is followed by a series of objectives that focus on serving geography and geographers.

Now we find ourselves at the dawn of the twenty-first century living through critical times of rising poverty and inequality across places; of struggles over environmental protection; of health pandemics; and enormous environmental and humanitarian disasters, as well as intense conflicts from Darfur to Iraq. At the same time, advances in our discipline allow us to speak evermore richly to societal challenges in this new century. And so I suggest that we revisit the way we frame the mission of the AAG. Our current mission statement focuses exclusively on ourselves; on advancing geography and the application of geographic research to standards of relevance defined by governmental, regulatory, or corporate agencies/actors. And yet as a community of scholars and practitioners, we have a broader commitment to serving the public good and to preparing citizens for the challenging times in which we live. I propose that we revisit this mission and express our outward orientation, as AAG members and as geographers, and highlight our goal of contributing to world understanding and to larger societal problems.

Beyond this question of which audiences we are addressing, many of us work in colleges and universities where we teach geography as a fundamental element of a liberal education in which *critical thinking and basic research* are our central goals. This is another reason for revisiting our mission statement, because it currently emphasizes the *application* of geographic research. There are many among us who resist strong pressures (from the government and some funding agencies) to justify all of our work on the basis of its immediate applicability. This is coupled with a strong desire to defend the societal importance of what my colleague Rick Roth *Lawson* refers to as "gadfly institutions" in society—institutions that engage in critical debate and that pursue knowledge for its own sake, rather than for a strategic or economic return. Revisiting the language in our AAG mission statement allows us to explicitly consider these values and to focus our collective energies on how geographic analysis can advance world understanding.

Our discipline has evolved and expanded in very exciting ways over the last 100 years, as can be clearly seen from the provocative centennial essays commissioned by Alec Murphy and published in the *Annals of the AAG* (December, 2004). These essays refer to the breadth and depth of theoretical and methodological advances through which we understand the global and intellectual shifts swirling around us. Geographers have made great strides in many arenas, theorizing and analyzing the spatiality of capitalism, complex geographies of privilege and exclusion, scalar-geographies of climate and ecosystem changes, the power of geospatial techniques for serving society, spaces of vulnerability in nature-society relations, poverty and inequality trends

under neoliberal governance, how state power and governance is refracted through religious difference, health pandemics across places, and the list can of course, go on.

Inevitably, we each view the field through our own lens and we would create different (but I hope overlapping) lists of the challenges that face society.



Lawson

My point is that we have made enormous advances in critical analysis in the last fifty years and we need to self-consciously build an AAG mission and goals that take this work into account. For me, a reworked mission statement would also explicitly promote the diversity of geography on behalf of the

entire profession. I am not advocating that we highlight only one theoretical or methodological slice of our discipline, even as I do suggest we should foreground our work in service of more inclusive visions of society. While much work on social and environmental justice is carried out by those engaged with Marxian, feminist and anti-racist theories, it is equally true that researchers from across the full range of theoretical and methodological approaches are involved with questions of equity, inequality, and questions of justice. Geospatial technologies are being put to work for social and environmental justice. Geographic data collection, analysis, and spatial representation are actively being employed to construct policies that are more inclusive and attentive to the concerns and needs of groups that have historically been excluded from decision-making (see for example work by Mei-Po Kwan, Paul Robbins, Sarah Elwood, Kathleen O'Reilly, Eugene Martin's organization CommEn Space in Seattle, and the CIMAS foundation in collaboration with geographers in Ecuador, to name only a few).

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Social Science PhDs—Five Years Out

PhDs who earned their degrees between July 1, 1995 and June 30, 1999 in anthropology, communication, geography, history, political science, and sociology may soon be asked to participate in a national survey focused on job search, work/life choices and dilemmas, and doctoral program evaluation. The survey, "Social Science PhDs—Five Years

Out" is funded by the Ford Foundation. Five to nine years out is an ideal time to reflect on career choices and doctoral education because in that time PhDs have had opportunities to see how well their education has prepared them for their careers.

Invitations to participate will be sent by electronic and postal mail. If you receive an invitation, please complete the survey. The

information gathered from this survey will guide doctoral program re-assessment efforts across the country. The survey is administered by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), located at the University of Washington in Seattle. For more information about the survey, visit CIRGE's website at www.cirge.washington.edu.

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- An **interactive website** that students can use to develop professional networks in the U.S. and internationally, share and exchange resources for improving their professional skills, and discuss issues related to life and work in graduate school.

In the coming months the AAG will invite departments and students to participate in all phases of the research, from materials development to pilot testing.

Volunteers in the first year include departments in Georgia, New York, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Utah. For added perspective on women and minority concerns, the PIs will consult with local chapters of Supporting Women in Geography, the Committee on the Status of Women in Geography, the Geographic Perspectives on Women Specialty Group, and the AAG Diversity Task Force.

For more information about the EDGE project, please contact Michael Solem (msolem@aag.org), Ken Foote (k.foote@colorado.edu), or Jan Monk (jmonk@email.arizona.edu).

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Solem, M.N., and Foote, K.E. 2004. Concerns, attitudes, and abilities of early-career geography faculty. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94(4): 889-912.

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In recent decades we have witnessed an efflorescence of civil society groups working across scales and an enormous range of societal issues. Reworking our mission statement would provide an opportunity to talk about a broader set of relationships that the AAG can foster. This would serve to include those geographers working with non-governmental organizations, foundations, community activist and advocacy organizations, and think tanks. If we as members of the AAG explicitly articulate our relationships to these groups, this is a first step in strengthening and expanding those relationships and the possibilities for collaboration with these different partners. If we build relationships with independent donors, foundations, and institutes, we can create new spaces for basic research, critical thinking, and the advancement of knowledge that critiques the status quo.

Let me be clear that this is in no way a criticism of the superb work our Association is doing (see my January 2005

column). Further, our long-range plan for the Association, lead by Susan Cutter from 2000 to 2003, does include some of the arguments I make here. The plan notes the importance of building diverse connections to informal educators; to social groups and non-governmental organizations; and of encouraging geographers to engage in public debate about the most pressing issues of our times. But shifting institutional culture, and the way we all think about the role of the AAG, takes time. Language matters, and we can articulate these values and goals succinctly and put them front and center in our Association through our mission and goals in our materials, on our website, and in ways that permeate all of our work.

Starting from a rearticulation of our values, goals, and mission we can continue the ongoing work of designing activities and services that reflect this vision. For example, we should ensure that our AAG jobs network and career advice pages

reflect careers in community service, non-profits, advocacy, and activism. We can ask council (as suggested by Mitchell in the centennial *Annals* in 2004) to commission white papers each year to provide summary information on pressing geographical issues for the media, congressional staff, and other audiences. We can follow Alec Murphy's advice to challenge ourselves to write opinion pieces for our newspapers and we might start by adding an Op/Ed page to the AAG *Newsletter*. Writing articles on world-shaping events for the newsletter would both articulate what geographers have to contribute, and would provide experience in this different form of writing. And of course, I rely on all of you to tell me how else can we revision our mission and goals and how we as geographers can serve the public through our work.

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