

Musings from the Hills of West Virginia

As I begin this column, we are experiencing one of those major snowstorms in West Virginia and throughout the Northeast that people will refer to for years to come. Yet, by the time this column reaches you I am hopeful (as are others weathering this long winter) that there will be signs of spring on the horizon and nature will begin to burst forth in its various forms. As I look out from my office at the snow covered hills and the partially frozen Monongahela River, I want to reflect on some of the recent positive happenings relative to the Association and geography, as well as some of my recent readings that are relevant to our discipline.

In my July 2002 column I wrote about the value of the AAG as a professional organization, and among other points, I addressed my concerns about the erosion of our membership base. I have made an effort through my comments at regional meetings (as well as my challenge to the regional divisions and regional councillors to increase their membership bases), through my other communications, and through the appointment of a membership committee to begin to address this concern. I am pleased to report that individual memberships have increased by 9.4% to over 7,100, and that, plus library and institutional memberships, puts the AAG's total membership at over 8,000. I congratulate those in the New England-St. Lawrence Valley region for the largest percentage increase in membership (over a 100% increase), and the Pacific Coast region for the largest absolute increase in membership to the AAG. Every region but one experienced a growth in membership. Despite this positive trend, there is still work to be done in broadening our membership and strengthening the overall sustainability of our membership base.

As you are aware from my column last month, the AAG has initiated a major centennial fundraising campaign to strengthen opportunities for advancing geography on a variety of fronts. I realize that this is a difficult time to start a major

fundraising effort (given our slow economy and budget shortfalls in many states), yet our membership is already responding in positive ways. By the time this newsletter reaches you I am confident we will have over \$200,000 in commitments toward this effort. Thanks to each of you who have already responded to this important need as we work to ensure the vitality of geography during the AAG's second hundred years.

Speaking of our centennial, I encourage our specialty groups to submit information on the history and developments of their groups to Donald Dahmann (ddahmann@yahoo.com), for inclusion in the Geography Timeline. The Timeline will be an important part of the AAG's and geography's historic record as we celebrate our centennial and beyond.

I wonder how many of you are aware that Gamma Theta Upsilon (GTU), the international geography honor society, had its jubilee celebration at the AAG Annual Meeting in New Orleans. The impact this 75-year old organization has had on the discipline and its students is significant. Despite Americans' hesitancy to join formal associations, there are still over 100 active chapters of GTU that serve as important centers for encouraging superior scholarship and leadership achievement in geography. Many such chapters sponsor visiting lecturers and field trips, and serve as an important locus for geography student communication across the campus community. I was proud that our local chapter at West Virginia University sponsored (with some help from the Dean's Office) 13 students to attend the AAG Annual Meeting in New Orleans. I congratulate all who have played some role in advancing GTU internationally as yet another way to continue advancing geography.



Nellis

From a couple of my recent readings, it is clear that geography is positioned to gain a more prominent role in the future research agenda of the National Science Foundation. "Complex Environmental Systems: Synthesis for Earth, Life, and Society in the 21st Century," is a 10-year outlook for the National Science Foundation (NSF) that was recently

developed by the NSF Advisory Committee for Environmental Research and Education (to obtain a copy of the report send an e-mail to ere-info@nsf.gov with your name and address). The report recommends increased focus on three interrelated areas: coupled human and natural systems; coupled biological and physical systems; and people and technology. Elaborations related to these areas clearly articulate how important geography is and will continue to be in addressing these subjects within enhanced research agendas. Geographers need to be poised to seize these new opportunities and the associated increase in investments that will accompany them.

In 2002, the Boyer Commission published "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: Three Years After the Boyer Report (for the complete report see <http://www.sunysb.edu/pres/0210066-Boyer%20Report%20Final.pdf>)." The report was based on a national survey of 123 research universities that measured progress universities have made on the Commission's 1998 recommendations. Although there were several recommendations in the original report, three themes were prominent—the need for research-based learning and enhanced inquiry based learning, and the development of a capstone experience. Based on discussions with many geographers around the country and in my own experiences as an external reviewer for geography programs nationally, it is clear that geography is engaging students in ways

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across disciplines is a relatively new and evolving frontier," the report states. "An integral part of this approach is the collection of environmental information across spatial, temporal, and organizational scales and the effective communication of this knowledge to and among researchers, educators, students, resource and industrial managers, policy makers and the public." Disciplinary fields of study will of course remain important, and new interdisciplinary programs will develop, but tomorrow's scientists will need to be prepared to contribute effectively to collaborative teams that include researchers with many disciplinary backgrounds, resource managers, and policy makers. "Faculty members will be called on to partner across institutional boundaries to develop innovative programs that provide a continuous route of advancement for students."

In her comments on new developments at the horizons of science at the recent National Council for Science and the Environment conference, in which the AAG participated, NSF Director Rita Colwell observed that, "Discovery and

innovation are the heart and soul of the scientific endeavor. Although the details may not be clear, we can still discern the shape of the landscape that's ahead. Our new information and communication technologies have transformed the very conduct of research, helping us to handle huge amounts of data, enabling new ways to communicate and collaborate around the globe....To the traditional methods of theory and observation, we now have the added sophisticated modeling and simulation techniques that allow us to probe the complexities and the dynamics of environmental systems at all levels. Increasingly, we're able to predict some of the consequences of environmental change."

However, as the NSF 10-Year Outlook also pointed out, "Imagination, diversity, and the capacity to adapt quickly have become essential qualities for both institutions and individuals, not only to facilitate research, but also to ensure the immediate and broad-based application of research results to the environment." NSF's outlook for the next decade reflects significant opportunities

for both geography's traditions and its recent innovations, not only for greater funding for geographic research from NSF, but also for greater contributions to the needs of society, provided we can move forward quickly and surely and creatively enough to realize the potential now before us. ■

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Copies of the NSF report cited above are available by contacting ere-info@nsf.gov.

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that address these three themes. Many geography lab experiences and advanced classes, for example, are research based, and although field work at the undergraduate level has diminished in many geography programs, where it does occur, students have wonderful experiences that often benefit them in ways central to the recommendations of the Boyer Commission. Based on feedback to the survey, the Commission recognizes the need for more faculty, smaller class sizes, and greater incentives for faculty in supporting undergraduate teaching at research universities. Although the latter of these is clearly being addressed at research universities and has frequently been important in large geography programs at major universities nationally, with the current budget crisis, we are all, unfortunately, being forced to teach more with fewer resources.

Geography and our Association continue to make progress on various fronts, and the opportunities for strengthening geography remain extensive. I welcome your thoughts on any of these musings. ■

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"Doing Fieldwork" to be Reprinted

"Doing Fieldwork," the special double issue of the American Geographical Society's *Geographical Review* (Vol. 91, Nos. 1 and 2), is being reprinted. The original printing of the issue, which came out in late 2001, was unusually large. Despite that, greater-than-anticipated sales of the issue have almost depleted the original printing. That has made it necessary to print an extra run to meet continuing demand. The fresh supply is expected in AGS offices in late March. Instructors ordering classroom quantities are apparently using the volume as a supplementary text, especially for classes in fieldwork methods.

"Doing Fieldwork," co-edited by *GR* Editor Paul Starrs and guest editor Dydia

DeLyser, contains 56 essays by geographers about their fieldwork experiences and their views of the role of fieldwork in the life of the geographer. One reviewer has described these as "mini case studies" of the issues bound up in the fieldwork experience. A four-and-a-half page introduction by the editors asserts the indispensability of fieldwork for the true geographical scholar and celebrates the remarkable variety of paths fieldwork research can take.

The 508-page volume sells for \$39.00 plus shipping and handling. There are discounts for bulk purchases. For ordering information, contact James W. Thomas at 212-422-5456 or by email at JWThomas@amergeog.org. ■