

Interview of David Kaplan

by Francisco Klauser



Whom does the AAG represent?

The American Association of Geographers is the pre-eminent community of geographers in the US. It began as an association that was primarily meant to represent academic geographers, and it still has a strong academic bent although it also welcomes people who are non-academics. There are a large number of graduate students as you might imagine and current faculty or ex-faculty in geography either belong to the AAG or have belonged to it at some point. I don't think there would be too many people who have never belonged to the AAG at some point in their careers.

Right now we have about 12,000 members and about 30% of our members come from outside of the US. I would say the AAG has emerged as a meeting point for geographers from the whole world, unlike other associations. We have tried to acknowledge that. Years ago, we changed the name from the Association of American Geographers to the American Association of Geographers which indicates that we are based in the US but see ourselves as the association of geographers throughout the world.



DAVID KAPLAN

is the president of the American Association of Geographers (AAG). He is also a professor of Geography at Kent State University, where he has taught since 1995. His main research interests include nationalism, borderlands, ethnic and racial segregation, urban and regional development, housing finance, and sustainable transportation.

Image: David Kaplan at the awards ceremony, AAG annual conference 2019, 7 April 2019, Washington, DC. Photo: Rebecca Pendergast

How do you negotiate these two levels, the global and the national level?

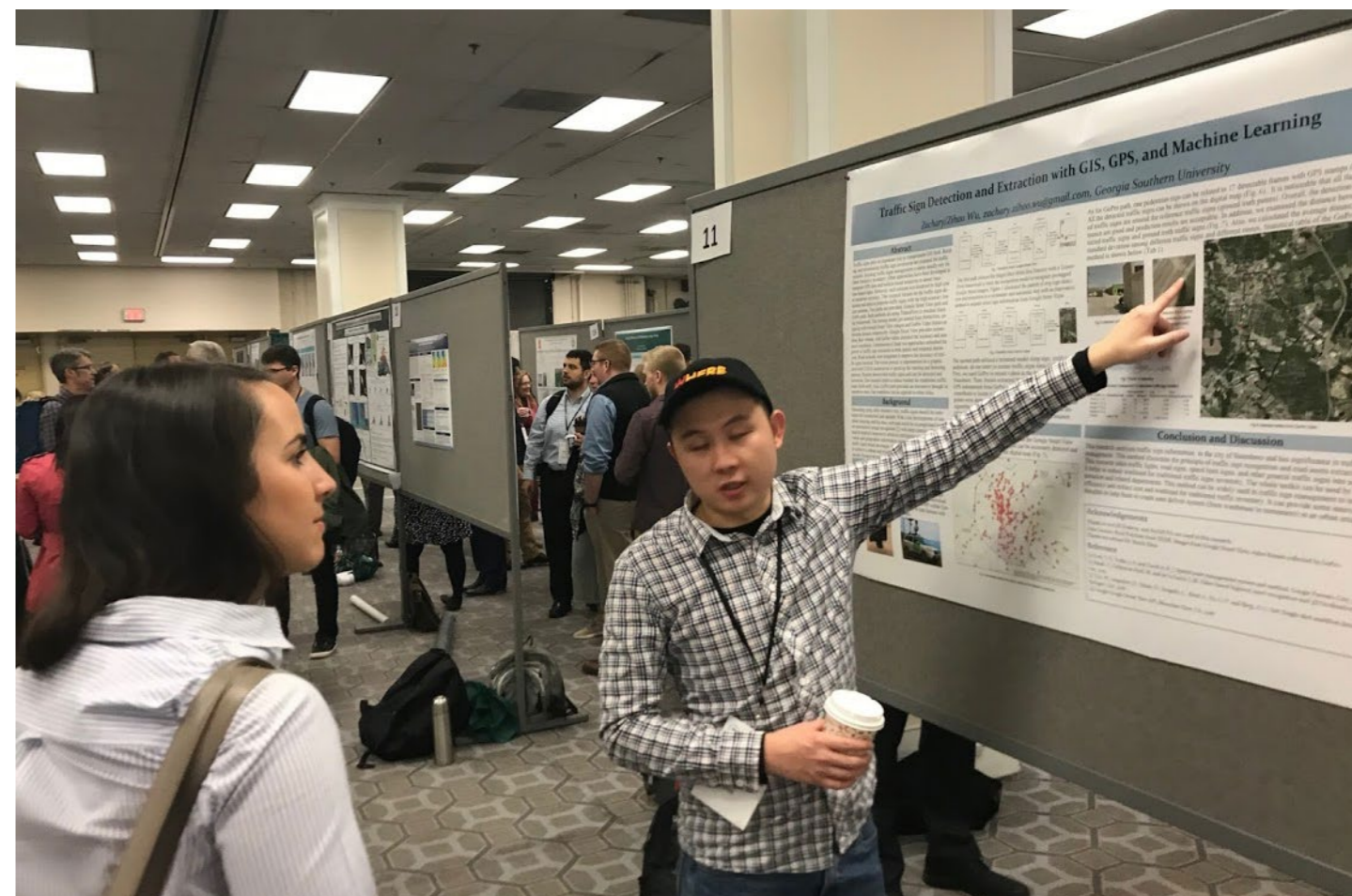
I think it's a tricky thing to do and we're doing it as we speak. One thing I've tried to do is to create more options for people to be involved in the governance of the association. Two of the newest editors of our flagship journal, 'The Annals', are outside of the US – one is based in London and one is based in British Columbia. I'm also trying to initiate a program - and we'll see how successful it is - where we have a councillor who comes from outside of the US to represent people from other parts of the world.

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Do you also get national, regional or local requests? Can you engage for example with issues surrounding the teaching of geography in primary or secondary schools?

Yes. While we are thinking about the world and international geography we're also always thinking a lot about our regions. One of the things I try to do is to bolster the roles of the regions. We're divided into 9 US based regions and each of those regions has an important position. They also have their own meetings for example.

The other part is that, you're right, we're always worried about the state of geography in the US. It's in some ways ironic, because as the US is so big and as the AAG is fairly strong the AAG has become a very important hub for worldwide geography but as you probably know, in the US, geography is not nearly



Poster session, AAG annual conference 2019, 4 April 2019, Washington, DC. Photo: Rebecca Pendergast

as powerful a discipline as it is in other parts of the world. In the US, only about 1% of all college students are geography majors, and I compared this to the UK where it is about 5%. I don't know what it is in Switzerland but it's probably similar to the UK. In the UK it's a strong major on a par with majors such as history, political science or geology – we don't quite have that in the US and of course we're always concerned with that. So one of the things we're trying to do is improve the status of geography locally and nationally.

How do you implement your main aims? We were just talking about these educational issues and objectives. Do you have people in your organisation dealing with that specific aspect, or do you have specific funding to provide to help promote geography education?

In terms of helping out at the more local level I just had a 3-hour discussion with my task force on regions, via zoom, about how we go about getting the regions more support. It does often boil down to money. The central office might give the regions extra money to do things, but there can also be indirect funds that we free up via extra support. The central office might assume certain responsibilities or en-

hance their regional publicity, which is something I've been working on today. We're trying to do what we can to create better connections.

Also, whenever we find out a university department has problems or there is a threat to its existence we get together and do everything we can to send support documents and whatever might be helpful. So far it has been effective; we've done a good job of forestalling closures and keeping geography viable around the entire country.

Is your position an honorary position, or do you get a salary for it because you seem to be extremely busy?

No and no, haha! It's not an honorary position and I don't get a salary. The way the governance works for the AAG is that there are councillors, some of them are voted on in their respective regions and some are voted by the larger group, and then there is what I call presidential councillors. I was nominated and successfully ran for vice-president. Then the vice-president pretty much automatically becomes the president. There's a vote, but you're normally the only person who's on the ballot. And after the president's term they continue to be in the leadership team and on the executive committee.

In terms of paid staff, we also work with an exec-



Meeting on teaching geography, AAG annual conference 2019, 4 April 2019, Washington, DC. Photo: Rebecca Pendergast

utive director who is the paid officer of the AAG and there are about 20 staff members at the AAG in Washington DC. So, the president and the council are the people who make the policy and make decisions and then the AAG from the Executive Director down are the ones who implement the policy.

So what motivated you to assume that role?

Someone nominated me to be VP - and I was very surprised and happy. I just said 'Wow! My university is a good, solid university, it's a research university, and we have a lot of PhD students, but it's not considered one of the top 20 or 30 universities in the US like the University of Wisconsin or Berkley or places like that. Most of the AAG presidents have historically come from those types of institutions. I have always said that I was one of the few people that did not come from one of the more elite institutions in the country, which I think is a good thing. It's really helped to spark my interest in bringing the community of geography much more towards what I consider less

well-represented institutions, such as community colleges, smaller state universities and historically black colleges, of which there are many in the US. Places like these have a big role to play and my sensitivity to it is probably based on my background.

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If we stay with the more personal questions, what comes to mind if I ask you to tell me a good story of your time as president?

I would say among the most fulfilling aspects of my job has been the opportunity to go to a lot of regional meetings. One of the things that I enjoyed the most is going around to all the student posters and presentations that I could see and really talking to the students. I think they got a thrill out of it because it's like 'Woah the president of the AAG is checking up with me!' It's just a title, but for many of them it is something that is meaningful because it represents 'Geography'. And here they are as undergraduate and graduate students, and they get a chance to explain to me what their research interests are. It was really heart-warming being able to go around to see all these students and their work and I'd never been able to do that before.

There have also been some other experiences, which have been interesting. When I was in one of the regions, they insisted that the president be on the 'dream team' for the 'Geography Bowl'. We have a big Geography Bowl situation here, where all the regions have a geography team and they all compete within the region against each other and at a national level and they insisted that I be on this team and, of course, I didn't get any questions right! Hahahaha. That's the way it is! Haha.

Ha! Yes, I always have that experience when I'm doing a pub quiz, you know? Whenever there's a geography question and I just don't have a clue! So, in the next 5-10 years what do you think will be your key challenges as an association?

I think our challenge will be being able to maintain and increase the number of geographers not just in the association but in the US. It's good to be global, but geography in the US is always in a tenuous position and I think that we have to motivate people around the country to do whatever is possible to increase the number of students in geography. This has been a continual challenge, but I think sometimes geographers can lose sight of that when they get involved in their own things.

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On the other hand, I would expect a massive organisation like the AAG to also be under pressure from politics. Pressure to be useful for specific purposes and to contribute to national policies. The question is, how do we remain critical and how do we remain independent? Do you experience any of this tension between the more applied dimension of geography and then the more critical and perhaps activist stance?

I think that's a very important issue. I'm actually going to write a column about geography and politics for June 1st- maybe my last column as I don't know how controversial it's going to be, haha! Especially in this current political situation where there's so much anger at the president and the nature of our politics, geographers in some ways have to be very balanced. But it's hard to balance the role of being objective scholars and truth finders with some of the feelings that we have.

I will also say that in geography there is a tension between what we call applied geography and critical geography. There are some geographers who swing in one way very strongly or swing in the other way really strongly. I think most of us are in the middle trying to do what we can and see what our value is to our organisation or institution but also be at a point where we can question critically the underlying premises or assumptions when you're told 'you have to take a stand against this' or 'for this'.

I look forward to reading your column! Thank you very much it has been a great pleasure to talk to you.