

## **SPECIAL REPORT**

### **A Report on a Roundtable Discussion of the Future of Geography Education**

**Prepared by  
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Note: This Report was finalized in February 2020. It does not reflect any progress that has been made in any of these areas since February.

## I. Background

The geography education community in the U.S. is small and acutely aware of the challenges it faces. Moving forward, its members must work collaboratively and build capacity to provide high quality geography instruction in schools. Judicious decision-making matters now more than ever. Alarms were sounded by a series of events taking place across the last three years (2017-2019). Initially, these threats to the field's well-being and status might not have been perceived as ominous; but when compounded over time, their potential negative influence cannot be ignored. Numerous developments endanger the security and sustainability of geography in the future of K–12 education:

- In December 2018, the National Geographic Society (NGS) terminated the Network of Alliances for Geographic Education that had supported geography education initiatives in every state since 1985. It was replaced with a regional network and emphasis on online courses, communities and Advisory Councils, led by Regional Directors and other National Geographic staff. Heavy emphasis was placed on media outreach and a challenge for teachers and students to become explorers.
- In the Fall 2019, NGS terminated the State Geography Stewards and Advisory Councils, which facilitated communication with geography educators in each state. Following this news, the Society announced the vision and goals of its new Education Strategy, highlighted by three pillars: 1) Movement Building for Solution Finding, 2) Game Changing Tools, Supports, and Resources, and 3) Field Building and Influencing the Space. It is unclear how these pillars will be applied to improve the formal geography curriculum, especially regarding teacher training, curriculum development, and assessment.
- Institutional challenges exist for the National Council for Geographic Education, including, 1) declining registrations at annual meetings, 2) maintaining an understaffed office headquartered in a high-cost Washington, DC, 3) significant financial losses in the past decade, and 4) diminished membership.
- The National Assessment Governing Board announced in July 2019 that geography would no longer be assessed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has issued data and reports since 1994 to provide national-level assessments of student achievement and proficiency in geography.
- Recent AAG Council Meetings (2015-2018) have witnessed a sharp reduction in time allotted to discussing geography education issues (especially K–12-related matters).

- Among universities, faculty positions have declined for scholars specializing in geography education. Geography-related positions, predominantly focusing on GIS, have been added or merged with environmental science, digital scholarship labs and other non-traditional roles.
- The Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP) has sponsored no national-scale geography education initiatives since 2017. Meanwhile, the 35-year old GENIP organizational model (AAG, NCGE, AGS, NCGE) does not reflect or account for emerging capacities and existing initiatives in geography education (*e.g.*, university-based research centers, the research coordination network funded by National Science Foundation, Esri Education, and others). Changing priorities among GENIP members also warrant concern. For example, GENIP's recent letter in response to NAEP was not signed by NGS, which raises questions about the committee's ability to "Present a unified voice on issues of policy, research, and developments in geography education" (quoted from GENIP's guidelines).

## II. Initial Discussion

Because of these warning signs, the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education prepared a Roundtable regarding the future of geography education at the 2019 National Council for Geographic Education annual meeting in Austin, TX. A small, preliminary meeting occurred in San Marcos, TX on 26 September 2019. In attendance:

- Dr. Alexander Murphy: Professor, Rippey Chair in Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Oregon; pioneer of the College Board's Advanced Placement Human Geography course.
- Dr. Ellen Foster: Associate Professor, University of Mississippi; President of National Council for Geographic Education (2016).
- Dr. Robert Morrill: Professor Emeritus, Virginia Tech; Virginia Geographic Alliance Treasurer; Writing Committee for *The Guidelines for Geographic Education* (1984), *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards* (1994); President of National Council for Geographic Education (1989); George J Miller award winner.
- Dr. Michael Solem: Professor, Texas State University; Director of Educational Affairs for American Association of Geographers (AAG) (2006-2019); Co-Director of the National Center for Research in Geography Education; Representative to Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP) for AAG; AAG Grosvenor Honors.

- Dr. Richard Boehm: Professor, Jesse H. Jones Distinguished Chair in Geographic Education, Texas State University; Director of Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education; President of National Council for Geographic Education (1983); Writing Committee for *The Guidelines for Geographic Education* (1984), *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards* (1994); George J. Miller award winner; AAG Grosvenor Honors (2002).

From this meeting, an agenda was developed for the Roundtable discussion in Austin on “The Future of Geography Education.” This meeting was held on Friday morning, 22 November 2019, 9:00AM to 12:00PM, at the joint conference of the National Council for the Social Studies, NCGE, and the Texas Council for the Social Studies.

### III.

#### **Agenda for the Discussion (Abridged)**

1. Support for K–12 geography education at the American Association of Geographers (AAG).
2. Prospects for reinventing the Network of Alliances for Geographic Education, formerly supported by the National Geographic Society, with new goals and new leadership.
3. Repurposing GENIP and its membership guidelines.
4. K–12 education support and approaches based on new curriculum theory (e.g., student career and life aspirations) and state-based models of standards, teacher preparation, and assessment.
5. Revitalizing NCGE (e.g., expanded membership, financial growth, more traditional annual meetings, and a revamped Central Office).

What follows is a summary of the Roundtable’s response to the five agenda items, accompanied by recommendations. The synopsis captures the range of views and ideas expressed by participations about possible paths forward.

### IV.

#### **AAG and Geography Education**

AAG would benefit from regular reporting of K–12 geography education issues at the Council Meetings of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) and communication with the broader membership. Geography education lies at the core of AAG’s aim to address geography’s persistent underrepresentation of women and minorities, as well as the stagnant numbers of undergraduate and graduate geography degrees earned over the last few decades. Improvements are

unlikely without broad structural reforms in K–16 that encourage diverse populations of students to pursue degrees and careers in geography.

AAG should consider the following:

- Plan for annual meetings between the Executive Committees of the AAG and the National Council for Geographic Education. This strategy was used in the early 1980s with the “National Reform Movement in Geography Education,” which included publication of the Five Themes in *The Guidelines for Geographic Education, Elementary and Secondary Schools*, and National Geographic Network of Alliances for Geographic Education.
- Reserve a section of the AAG journal, *The Professional Geographer*, for articles reporting on advances in teaching and learning in U.S. higher education. This section’s subject matter would represent the American counterpart to the British publication, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*.
- Assess the ongoing effects of renaming geography departments in order to emphasize science and technology.
- Encourage research, education, and outreach that bridges geography in K–12 and higher education.

## V.

### Network of Alliances for Geographic Education

The final chapter of the Alliance Network does not end with the NGS withdrawal of direct financial and institutional support. More than 20 states are secured by educational endowments contractually oriented toward state-based K–12 activities in geography education. Advocacy, a central tenet for the Alliances throughout history, remains a priority for active states to advance K–12 geography education. While not tethered to National Geographic, remnants of the original 50-state network have the opportunity to mobilize NGS’s new programs.

To continue the service function of the state-based Alliance program, the following is recommended:

- Assign NCGE as the new home for the Network of Alliances.
- Require Active Alliances to pay annual dues to NCGE for organizational services.
- Develop and maintain an accurate roster of Alliance Coordinators and other leaders in geography education. Accompany this roster with a statement of educational purpose that unifies the Alliance Network’s message, regardless of varying responsibilities from state to state.

- Through Alliance Coordinators, identify state education award winners for the annual NCGE conference.
- Foster dialogue and idea-sharing through a business meeting of Alliances Coordinators during the annual NCGE conference.
- Elect a leadership group to determine the Alliance Network's common trajectory.
- Alert Alliance Coordinators to the proprietary value of the state-based network as gatekeepers for private industry to K–12 schools, teachers, and students. Negotiate the extent of access and coordination between Alliances and the commercial outlet in question.

## VI. GENIP

The Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP) was formed in 1985 and includes four major geography associations: AAG, NCGE, NGS and the American Geographical Society (AGS). The founding purpose of GENIP was to advocate for and support the 1984 *Guidelines for Geographic Education*, the “five themes,” and *Guidelines*-related publications. Later, GENIP undertook a planning and clearinghouse role to fashion large-scale geography education projects, such as the Geography Framework for the 1994 National Assessment of Education, National Assessment Governing Board, and the national standards project (1994) *Geography for Life*, including the revision and update (2012). Through these projects, GENIP has enjoyed successes in advancing geography education. As institutions have changed, however, institutional membership has not. GENIP risks stagnation in a period of rapid growth and broadened thinking within the geography education community.

To modernize the role of GENIP or an alternative national coordinating committee into the future, the following actions are recommended:

- Broaden membership to include new voices and points of view, especially as levels of involvement change among the four original institutions.
- Clarify the relationship of GENIP to the NGS Educator Network. Ascertain how the work traditionally performed by the former Alliance Network (31 December 2018) can be maintained or enhanced, particularly in light of NGS's termination of State Stewards and Advisory Council members and organization's decision to no longer participate in organizational statements and sign-on letters (*e.g.*, the recent GENIP response to NAEP).

- In the case of considering GENIP membership by commercial companies, carefully negotiate the conditions of membership to avoid financial “conflicts of interest.”
- Extend the review of GENIP guidelines (revised as of 2018) beyond the internal advisory board to a broader audience from dues-paying organizations.
- Revise leadership positions in GENIP to be short-term, revolving, and inclusive of diverse perspectives and expertise in geography education.

## **VII.**

### **K–12 Curriculum**

As of 2020, geography education’s most visible contribution to the K–12 curriculum has been the national standards in 1994 and 2012, published in the volume *Geography for Life*. This thoughtful document emanated from the national standards movement of the early 1990s and represents a high point in thinking and advocacy among geography educators and school officials. Despite these efforts, results from NAEP have repeatedly documented no significant gains in geographic learning over the last quarter-century, indicating especially low-levels of achievement among African Americans and Hispanic students. Discussions are afloat concerning yet another revision of *Geography for Life*. Future curriculum documents and approaches should draw on empirical research that reflects educational contexts, students’ life and career aspirations, and state and national workforce needs.

The following is suggested:

- Tailor new curriculum guides for K–12 geography to address the diverse life and career aspirations of the modern student. Consider existing initiatives like Powerful Geography, which applies empirical research to generate a bottom-up curriculum (see [www.powerfulgeography.org](http://www.powerfulgeography.org) for more information).
- Align new subject matter in geography with curricular work in other disciplines such as the National Council for the Social Studies C3 (College, Career, and Civic Life) Framework, the Next Generation Science Standards, and Career and Technical Education.
- Recognize the varying educational priorities of local educational institutions, such as the attitude of “Enroll, Employ, or Enlist” among some high schools.
- Prepare any new framework guide to reflect state-based curriculum and assessment alignment, along with state-based teacher certification programs.

## VIII. NCGE

Opportunities abound for NCGE to reenergize its institutional makeup and leverage resources like the newly incorporated Alliance Network. One-on-one discussions have taken place between the Grosvenor Center and the new NCGE Executive Director. Through these conversations, it becomes clear that NCGE has an important function to lead geography educators through the twenty-first century. Roundtable participants agree that reinvigorating NCGE is necessary for securing the future of geography education. A strong and productive NCGE is critical to all of the other recommendations in this report.

Our suggestions include:

- Coordinate a membership drive for both K–12 educators and administrators, and for university professors.
- Hold a broad fundraiser consisting of the 35 Past Presidents and their close associates.
- Establish an independent annual conference, publish a fall conference program, and elevate the visibility of the NCGE awards program for teachers, professors, and researchers.
- Arrange an annual meeting between the NCGE and AAG Executive Committees to discuss cooperation.
- Consider relocating the NCGE Central Office to a university campus.
- Maintain the network of past Alliance Coordinators.
- Carefully review financial relations with commercial companies.
- Prepare educational and financial reports for the business meeting at the national conference.

## IX. Participants for the Roundtable Discussion

### Moderator:

- Dr. James Kracht, Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University; Past-President NCGE 1987

### Participants:

- Dr. Richard Boehm, Professor, Texas State University; Past-President of NCGE 1983; Texas Geographic Alliance
- Mr. Kurt Butefish, Instructor, University of Tennessee Knoxville; Tennessee Geographic Alliance
- Dr. Dawna Cerney, Professor, Youngstown State University
- Ms. Annie Evans, Director, New American History, University of Richmond; Virginia Geographic Alliance Coordinator



- Dr. Thomas Herman, Professor, San Diego State University; California Geographic Alliance
- Dr. Georgeanne Hribar, Professor, Old Dominion University; Virginia Geographic Alliance
- Mrs. Erin Kracht, Alabama Geographic Alliance (retired); Alabama Geographic Alliance
- Dr. Edward Kinman, Professor, Longwood University; Virginia Geographic Alliance Coordinator
- Dr. Robert Morrill, Professor Emeritus, Virginia Tech; Past-President NCGE 1989; Virginia Geographic Alliance Treasurer
- Dr. Michael Solem, Professor, Texas State University; GENIP representative for AAG
- Dr. Joseph Stoltman, Professor, Western Michigan State University; Past-President NCGE 2009; Michigan Geographic Alliance Coordinator

**Recorders:**

- Dr. Thomas Larsen
- Dr. Joann Zadrozny

**Note**

This report was prepared by the Research Faculty of the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education: Dr. Richard G. Boehm, Dr. Michael Solem, Dr. Joann Zadrozny, and Dr. Thomas Larsen. The Final Report was sent to all the participants of the Roundtable for their input and review before this final published version. We thank everyone for their input.