Letter from the President

NACIS is a fascinating community. I know the word "community" is overused, but I choose the term deliberately here. We share many common interests, we constructively interact with each other, and we want to preserve the group's identity and integrity: we are a kind of community. About one third of our members attend the annual meeting, a high level of active participation. At those meetings I see an exceptional degree of cooperation, earnest engagement, and mutual respect among attendees representing a wide variety of interests within and close to cartography.

One shared interest is an appreciation of map design both as a craft one practices and as a subject of intellectual study. NACIS provides a crossroads where cartographers faced with practical challenges of map production intersect with scholars studying the theoretical foundations of cartography. Over the years that I have been involved in the Society, an idea has repeatedly arisen for a conference paper session on map design in which one presents examples of design failures, bad taste and generally weird attempts at the cartographer's art. The idea is to explain and reinforce the design principles that trained cartographers promote by examining the consequences of casual or uninformed design. No one has yet (so far as I know) attempted such a session, probably because to write the abstract would be a very delicate matter. How do you express the idea as a sincere endeavor not intended to insult well-intentioned, amateur mapmakers?

That such an idea should arise and be cheerfully discussed with equal relish by both academics and practitioners speaks of the famously congenial atmosphere of NACIS. When I hear Charlie Rader (University of Wisconsin—River Falls) coin the marvelous term "cartastrophies," and John Krygier (Ohio Wesleyan University) suggest a session entitled "My Worst Map," I remember how important it is that NACIS provides that congenial atmosphere enabling forthright discussion of all matters cartographic: a "safe venue," as Alex Tait, of International Mapping Associates, puts it. Many of us share an enduring fascination with map design, either as a practiced craft or as an intellectual problem. Mark Denil (Conservation International) describes professional cartography as "…a body of informed practice" and I think this phrase succinctly captures something of the source of our interdisciplinary interest. As a "body," cartography is a collection of related elements; as "practice," cartography is the skilled performance of disciplined work; as an "informed practice," cartographic work is subjected to analysis and criticism, and its problems are matters for contemplation and research.

NACIS offers us the venue for discussing this practice with those performing the work, those inventing new methods and those who critique, analyze and contemplate the practice.

Another shared interest within the NACIS community is one of our middle names: *information*. It is for some constructive purpose that we create maps, even those that are more **art**ographic than cartographic. Maps and map-like artifacts are created with intention, and I think this intention generally has to do with the representation of concepts. As artifacts of concept representation, all maps contain information. Here is another crossroads provided by NACIS: cartographic information is at the intersection of geographic information analysis and artifact stewardship. People in these professions love information and are eager to guide us

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toward the knowledge we can derive from it. Map librarians and GIS analysts are guides who point us to knowledge by providing and analyzing geographic data.

In conventional map-making, the information content is an assertion of facts about the world, and the usual intention is to explain or persuade. In artistic, personal cartographies, the map artifact may be no more than the remaining evidence of the artist's process of becoming informed. NACIS members value the refreshing perspectives on mapping provided by colleagues like Adele Haft (City University of New York), who explains cartographic references found in literature, and Karen Cook (University of Kansas), who deciphers 15th-century cartographic documents for us. NACIS offers a meeting ground for the study and discussion of the informational intent of cartography, from the conservation of data and artifacts to the methods of spatial data analysis to personal expressions utilizing cartographic references. This again reminds me of the important role NACIS plays in providing a rigorous, respectful forum for all thoughts cartographic.

My recent work in information technology has revolved around the planning and design of databases, and the effective use of data for organizational benefit. "Information," in a contemporary technological sense, is data presented in a context useful to people. The information technology (IT) profession has been increasingly interested in recent years in assuming the role of *information* and *knowledge* managers. *Business intelligence*, *data warehousing*, *data mining*, *knowledge management* and *decision-support* are some of the popular phrases in contemporary IT. All of these concepts, when reduced to their essential ideas, are familiar to cartographers. A *data warehouse* is a database designed for analysis and decision-making, rather than for simply recording operational transactions. The principles of cartographic generalization are strikingly similar to the principles of data warehouse design: the designer determines the kinds of information the user wants to have and then selects, simplifies and summarizes source data to make the resulting derivative accessible to the user.

Sophisticated design methods and complex software have been developed to support data warehouses so that they import and present the right data in the right way for decision-makers. The IT industry has discovered what cartographers have known for decades—people perform best when just the right amount of information, rather than all the information available, is organized and presented to them clearly. Much art and science is deployed in finding that "right amount" of information and in presenting it "clearly." Whether this is for tabular or spatial data, many of the concepts are fundamentally the same. We trade precision and completeness for manageability and clarity. Such thinking is inherently cartographic and it is becoming the kind of thinking required to manage tabular data well for analysis and decision support. I find it intriguing that these apparently diverse disciplines—cartography and data warehousing—have much in common.

The applications of information technology are continually expanding—we use or are experimenting with the use of electronic data gadgetry for more and more aspects of our professional and personal lives. Cartographic methodologies are now dominated by information technology, from data collection and analysis through graphic design and publishing. Invention and innovation with IT hardware and software show no sign of waning. The interests of NACIS are starting to look much like some of the interests within the IT professions: data and information and their representation through media aimed at one or more of our senses.

As IT discovers the need for presenting data creatively and effectively, and develops software to service this need, it will inevitably meet up with cartography. I believe many GIS professionals are recognizing their inevitable merger with mainstream IT, and IT is gradually becoming more spatially and geographically savvy ("location-based services" is a new IT buzzword). Where the visual, tactile, audio or other sensory presentation of geography is the problem, cartography will be the discipline to go to.

Cartography's conceptual foundations remain solid and relevant: how does one produce the most effective sensory presentation of geographically based data? How does one acquire, store, conserve and present those artifacts for subsequent users? How does one teach the techniques of map production and the skills of map use? GIS is already an ally in the cartographer's quest for a wide selection of data sources and for data sources that are reliably maintained. IT's increasing interest in data presentation directly relates to cartography. This, to me, presents a bright and exciting future for NACIS. We have vast information resources readily available and usable, great graphic arts technologies, and fascinating new media for publishing cartographic works. There are plenty of intriguing maps, and new forms of maps, to create and many intriguing and rewarding things to talk about.