

ABOUT AGU

AGU Leadership Reflects Back, Looks Forward

AGU president Mike McPhaden, president-elect Carol Finn, and executive director Chris McEntee have served in their current capacities for approximately a year. In this interview, held 18 August after the AGU Council meeting, they reflect back on the year and discuss prospects for the future.

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Q: When you each started in AGU leadership, about a year ago, what were your expectations?

McPhaden: My expectations were that this would be an adventure, a unique experience, in a new kind of AGU, both through our governance structure, which was newly established in the past year, and through the beginnings of implementing our new strategic plan, as well as working with our new executive director. Good things come in threes. It's been the adventure I expected, and more.

Finn: I expected it to be exciting, with some risk. I'm a risk taker. That's why I took this job. I expected that trying to juggle all the tasks the president-elect has was going to be a challenge. I'm the chair of a really large group, the AGU Council. At the first meeting I chaired, the fall Council meeting, there were 80 people in the room. I was excited, I was positive, I was confident, that we were going to be able to take all of the great member energy and focus it toward the strategic issues in the strategic plan.

McEntee: I expected it to be, professionally and personally, very exciting and stimulating and challenging, and I haven't been disappointed. And it's been fun. I expected that the organization was very committed to building on its base of scientific leadership and finding the best way to get that voice better heard outside of the scientific community. I think we've made a lot of progress.

Q: What would you each say are the most important changes that have happened at AGU in the past year?

McEntee: I think that we've made a good start on trying to align the work of the organization—whether it's at the board level, the council level, the committee level, the working group level, or the staff level—around the programs and strategies of the strategic plan. We've put our resources also behind that. We made additions in the budget that supported the directions of the strategic plan, and we're putting together working groups of volunteers and staff to be able to carry that out and new ways of working. So I think that's a really significant change for the organization.

McPhaden: I think the exercise of our new governance structure is an important change. Watching this evolve is tremendously satisfying because it was unclear how this experiment would play out.

Finn: The Council was given a charge of asking how to best configure itself. We

didn't really have a solid structure. So for me the most important thing is how much work we've actually gotten done and how much really good thinking. Today, for example, at the Council meeting we had really specific tasks and specific motions, so even in this chaotic space, people have been able to get the work done. I think that's really important. One more thing: I cannot emphasize enough how important it has been to have students and early-career people sitting at the table on the Council as Council members.

Q: What do you see as the strengths of AGU as an organization, and how are those strengths evolving?

McEntee: I think it's the integrity that is in the breadth and depth of the science. AGU science touches everything that makes it habitable on this planet. My friends talk to me and they say, "AGU, what's that?" and then I say, "It's geophysical science; it's everything from the deep core of the Earth to universes that we can't even imagine yet to everything in between." That's the depth and breadth of AGU science. To me that's the core strength of the organization.

Finn: I think the strength is not just the scientific integrity and depth of the members but their dedication to their fields and how that translates into dedication to AGU. It's an outward-looking organization as well as inward looking. That is really important. They're able to take that scientific rigor and integrity and then turn and say, "We're going to focus this in a way that's going to be beneficial to humanity."

McPhaden: Core strengths of scientific integrity and passionate commitment are the

striking attributes of our organization. I would say there is a desire and a willingness to expand on these scientific strengths to make the science more relevant to societal needs.

Q: What changes should members watch for in the near future?

McPhaden: I think you're going to see AGU become a more recognizable entity in the mind of the public and in the policy arena. This is part of our "science and society" goal. We made a real conscious effort to be more outspoken, because what we do is so relevant to so many aspects of life and property in the United States and around the globe. Natural hazards are based in geophysical science. We want to make sure that the public and policy makers understand the power of that science to better their lives and livelihoods. So the vision in my mind is that AGU is going to be recognizable in the same way that, say, the American Medical Association is recognizable. When you read about the AMA, you know exactly what the source of that authority is and how much weight it carries. When you see AGU in the press, you'll recognize right away that this is the "go to" place for authoritative information on Earth and space science.

McEntee: I think we're going to have a streamlined position statement process so that we can be more anticipatory. That can come from anywhere—from the membership, from staff, from the Council. It will be driven by external and internal pressures. I think we're going to have a streamlined process that allows us to get those position statements done in a more facile manner so that we can be positioned as an organization to speak out on those topics. I think we're going to have a wider breadth of position statements that enable us to be more effective, and it's going to be one that's more relevant because it will be more timely.

I think we're also going to see a deliberate and sustained focus on making sure that early-career scientists and students are involved and active at all points in the organization, along with groups that are traditionally underrepresented, whether they're minorities or emerging groups. I think we're going



AGU leaders sat down for an interview to reflect on the past year and discuss prospects for the future. Pictured are (left to right) AGU president Mike McPhaden, president-elect Carol Finn, and executive director Chris McEntee. Photo by Joan Buhrman.

to see a continued move toward a more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary focus.

Finn: I think that we're going to see a broader array of ways that the members can engage. We're going to have a clear process of being able to take member ideas and translate them into action. I think we're going to see more of the breadth of the Union in decision making and in recognition, and broad participation overall.

Q: *What are you excited about in the coming year?*

Finn: For me it's really this potential of engaging the grassroots part of the organization in a meaningful way, so that they have a real ownership in it, and that you see a really diverse group of people working on behalf of AGU.

McPhaden: Something that excites me is, again, this idea of AGU as an authoritative voice. We'll go about that through our own outreach efforts in the media and with policy makers but also through forming strategic partnerships with other organizations that have common interest in advancing similar scientific agendas. I see interacting with these other organizations and partnering with

them as a really exciting opportunity for us to engage a wider audience of professionals and also enrich our own scientific activities.

McEntee: I think we're going to try a different kind of meeting, a D. C. policy meeting. We're going to be trying some panels that are not just AGU scientists but have other types of scientists and other interest areas. So if you think about natural resources, for example, farmers needing access to water, we might have a panel with somebody representing the farming community, right along with an AGU scientist, right along with somebody who's been active in policy, right along with someone in the media. We're going to try that next year, and it should be really interesting. In addition, Mike appointed a task force on scientific ethics and integrity. I hope that by the end of 2012 we have revised policy around that. I think you'll probably also see a revision to our diversity and inclusion plan and strategy, and new ways to really drive leadership development.

Q: *Any concluding thoughts you'd like to share with AGU members?*

Finn: I feel fortunate to be the president-elect now because I have a chance to help

shape the form of the organization based on its function. We actually have a chance to have form follow function, and that form is really different than we've had before and different than a lot of other organizations. It's not hierarchical. Who makes the decision is not as important as the quality of the information on which that decision is based.

McEntee: I would say to the members, "I hope you see the excitement and you'll join in that excitement, maybe in ways that you hadn't thought of before." We have many opportunities for members to be engaged.

McPhaden: AGU is an exciting place to be now at this time in history. There's a lot of change going on, all for the positive. There's a tremendous amount of energy that we're tapping into with our membership. There's enthusiasm for looking at new ways of pursuing and promoting our science and making it more relevant. I'm thrilled to be the president of AGU at this point in history.

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