

WORLD GEOGRAPHY BOWL

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The World Geography Bowl (WGB) began in 1987 when a Syrian engineering student named Bashir Rabat at North Carolina State University challenged other North Carolina universities to bring teams to compete in a "Jeopardy" game involving international affairs. The purpose of the game, called the World Geography Bowl, was to provide an opportunity for students from several North Carolina educational institutions to meet one another in a friendly competition.

In the spring of 1990, Appalachian State University was invited. Neal Lineback took a team of eight students from ASU to play teams from nine other universities at Duke University. ASU won in one of the most thrilling academic events Lineback had ever seen. He immediately saw the World Geography Bowl as a vehicle to excite students and to attract them to professional Geography meetings.

In the summer of 1990, Lineback challenged each of the other nine SEDAAG state representatives to bring a team of "their best" to a regional World Geography Bowl competition at the November meeting in Columbia, South Carolina. Every state arrived with a team and the team from South Carolina won the inaugural SEDAAG event. That night, faculty from many SEDAAG schools looked down from the convention center balcony, witnessed seventy students from all across the region playing music, laughing and talking to one another and realized the value of the World Geography Bowl as a benefit to the Division and the discipline. Throughout the meeting professional paper sessions were filled to overflowing with students for the first time ever. There were a few detractors of the WGB at that meeting, largely because the organizers used some poor questions (written by a non-geographer). Lineback realized that the process needed to be refined by involving professional geographers in organizing the event and writing the questions. Nonetheless, most geographers came away from that initial event convinced that WGB would be good for Geography at every level.

Robert Reiman (Appalachian State) and Lineback wrote the questions for the 1991 SEDAAG-Asheville Southeast Regional WGB in an attempt to raise the academic and geographic level of the questions. Tom Deaton (Dalton State College) came onboard that year, bringing extensive College Bowl experience and raising the level of professionalism of the event's organization. NESTVAL also sent Bryon Middlekauff (Salem State) to view the event, so the WGB organizers challenged him to bring a NESTVAL team to the AAG-Atlanta meeting in the spring of 1993 to play a SEDAAG team in an exhibition game. This was the first National event.

Because the WGB events had become so large and involved, Lineback recommended to the SEDAAG Steering Committee that it establish a standing WGB Committee in 1993. He invited one person from each state to join the Committee, plus anyone else who would be willing to serve, generally having between 12 and 16 Committee members. The original members were: Sanford Bederman (Georgia State), Thomas Deaton (Dalton College), Dorothy Mason (N.C. A & T), Robert Morrill (Virginia Tech), Robert Myers (West Georgia College), Victoria Rivizzigno (U. of South Alabama), Robert Reiman (ret. ASU), Harry Schaleman (U. of South Florida-St. Petersburg), David Weaver (U. of Alabama), and Neal Lineback. The Committee members wrote questions and Deaton and Lineback assembled them into question rounds. The Committee members also served as Moderators and Judges. The SEDAAG WGB Committee became the WGB sanctioning body when Lineback was asked to write the official WGB Rules. The Committee passed them in 1994. Thomas Deaton became the official Judge at all WGB events and continued to serve in that capacity through 2002. At Deaton's recommendation, the events were changed from a single elimination format to a "round robin," whereby each team played every other team.

In 1994, Ron Abler (AAG Executive Director) authorized the purchase of four professional buzzer systems with AAG funds. Because of increased demand that followed, he bought two additional systems in 2000, bringing the total number of WGB buzzers to six. These buzzers were housed at Appalachian State and mailed out to any state or regional organization requesting their use. Users paid only the mailing costs. Abler also began authorizing travel funds for regional teams participating in National WGB events, thus greatly increasing opportunities for students to participate in National AAG meetings.

In 1994, James Young of ASU became the official Scorekeeper for the WGB, designing scorekeeping forms for all events. He has continued in this capacity into 2003, providing accuracy in recordkeeping that was essential to the integrity of the events.

By 1996, Lineback, Reiman, and Deaton realized that the people who wrote WGB questions were not being rewarded adequately and recommended to the SEDAAG WGB Committee that it establish "signature rounds." Each signature round was to be written entirely by one or more people, whose name(s) would be attached as author(s). Signature rounds have encouraged greater participation at every level of WGB events--state, regional, and national.

Osa Brand (AAG) assumed the role of Chair of a National WGB Committee in 1998 to develop rounds for and to monitor the annual competition at the National level at the AAG meetings. She, Deaton, and Lineback divided up the duties of operating the National event, but Dorothy Mason (NC A&T University), Sanford Bederman (Georgia State), and Robert Reiman served as editors and as representatives from the SEDAAG WGB Committee, the sanctioning body.

In 1998, the SEDAAG WGB Committee authorized a very successful All-Star/Faculty Dream Team competition at the SEDAAG-Memphis meeting, an event that has been a popular part of the regional meeting ever since. In this event, professional geographers – usually officers of SEDAAG and the AAG – compete against a team of all-stars from non-finalist SEDAAG state teams. The competition has given students who do not make the finals a greater incentive to attend the final competition and has provided considerable friendly competition with a huge audience of “pro-student” supporters.

Through academic year 2000-2001, there have been fourteen years of North Carolina WGB events, eleven years of regional events, and nine years of national WGB events. East Lakes, Great Plains/Rocky Mountains, NESTVAL, Middle States, and SEDAAG regions held regional WGB competitions in 2000-2001. During the fall of 2000, a high school version of WGB was initiated from Kennasaw State in Georgia and others are being initiated in North Carolina (UNC-Pembroke) and West Virginia (Concord College).

A conservative estimate of student participation in all World Geography Bowl events over the past fourteen years is 6,400, with about 2,200 of those participating more than once. More than 150 faculty members have been involved in writing questions, serving as judges and moderators, and participating as faculty players, question editors, and organizers. It is impossible to determine the numbers of spectators attending the events, but, for example, the final rounds at the 2002 SEDAAG-Richmond meeting completely filled a meeting room of 400 seats to overflowing.

Beginning in the fall of 2001, Laurence “Bill” Carstensen (Virginia Tech) and Lineback served as Co-Chairs of the WGB Committee for the SEDAAG-Louisville meeting. Following that meeting, Carstensen became the Organizer of the National WGB Event at the 2002 AAG meeting. At the end of 2001, Lineback stepped down as Co-Chair of the SEDAAG WGB Committee and Director of the National World Geography Bowl. He continued to serve as a regular member of the SEDAAG WGB Committee, assisting Committee Chair Carstensen, Dorothy Mason, and Chief Judge Tom Deaton with editing question rounds.

Carstensen became Chair of the SEDAAG WGB Committee and the National Director of the World Geography Bowl and continues to serve in that capacity. He has added innovations to events by inviting teams from other regions and composite teams from the audience to serve as “spoilers,” thus broadening the participation and excitement.

So what lies in the future of the WGB? It is clear that, as it has become better known nationally, student interest is up, participation is up, and the number of divisions putting on their own bowls is up. Early detractors have come aboard, and any of us who are sometimes “stuffy academicians” get an annual chance to lighten up and have fun with our students and our profession. The WGB’s diffusion throughout the entire AAG in such a short time is a credit to the way in which it developed and to those who have been involved at every level. The WGB grew up in SEDAAG and remains a source of pride for the division. The directors and committee cannot thank the division enough for the support that has made this shining example of student participation in professional meetings possible!