ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Developing Security Partnerships through Cultural Awareness

For more than 60 years, the United States has maintained one of their strongest alliances with the Republic of Korea (ROK, commonly referred to as South Korea) in a constantly evolving and strategically complex region. This alliance also supports one of the strongest economies in the world. Developing and sustaining that alliance is no small feat, with an average of 20,000 United States service members and their families, as well as a host of civil servants, living side-by-side with Korean citizens in communities throughout the country. In the current era of elevated geopolitical tensions, maintaining and strengthening this relationship is vital to a continuing peace on the Korean Peninsula.

In June 2017, Matthew R. Miller, an army officer and graduate of the UT geography program (’17), was assigned as an operations officer to the Combined and Joint Fires Element (CJFE) of the United States Forces Korea (USFK). In this capacity, Miller works on a daily basis with ROK officers and soldiers, pursuing the USFK Commander, General Vincent Brooks’ priorities of: sustain and strengthen the alliance, maintain the armistice, transform the alliance and sustain force, and enhance the team. In pursuit of these priorities, a strong understanding and implementation of cultural geography is key to fostering teamwork and strengthening the alliance. Implementing skills learned across a broad spectrum of courses and activities offered by the Department of Geography and the UT community has enhanced the multinational partnership within Miller’s individual office. Since his arrival, Miller has spearheaded a plan to provide training in these methods to the larger United States and ROK military communities.

Miller and Corporal Ji Han Choi, an allied ROK soldier, are working on a cultural awareness training chapter to add to the current literature distributed to military members arriving in Korea for the first time. A hallmark of this training is proposing operational models of cultural competence, which help dissect variations in national values of the United States and Republic of Korea. Current methods focus on long-term educational models that require months of training and exposure. The implementation of an operational model that can be achieved in a matter of hours of training will help to prepare members for multinational training and provide a base for the continued education they will receive throughout their assignment.

These techniques have already been implemented in individual engagements throughout CJFE. American and Korean counterparts alike have shown appreciation for the ability to assess cultural dimensions that form these interactions and compare them to their counterparts’ backgrounds.
Outreach is Our Mission

I wanted to add a quick note to say hello in my first year serving as the department head. Before going further, I would like to thank Derek Alderman for five years of service as our department head. Derek’s visionary leadership and tireless efforts since his arrival in August of 2012 have left the UT Department of Geography well positioned across the university and on the national stage.

The overarching theme of this year’s edition is outreach. While we have many missions, including cutting-edge research and teaching, outreach is perhaps our most important mission. Geography often fights for recognition as an academic discipline despite its ability to cut across myriad subjects and its facility for examining and offering solutions to some of the world’s most pressing challenges.

We are very fortunate to have so many geographers applying their considerable skills to various projects in the community, statewide, across the country, and even internationally. As you will see from this newsletter, a number of geographers have been involved in extensive outreach activities.

Henri Grissino-Mayer continues to receive national attention from various media sources for his research and insights on the wildfires that attacked the Smokies and threatened Gatlinburg in November of 2016. His work is important when not only placed within local and regional contexts, but also nationally, due to debates on the relationships between the need for continued economic development and the impacts of climate change.

Michael Camponovo and Kurt Butefish continue to canvas the state, imparting geospatial skills and other geographical techniques to K-12 students and their teachers. Their work is no easy task, yet vitally important to our state and society given the disappearance of geography as a formal course in primary and secondary school curricula. All of this comes at a time when geospatial skills are in increasing demand from both the public and private sectors.

If I were to do justice to all of our outreach projects, this note would be much longer and this newsletter could stretch as long as a Sunday issue of the New York Times. We hope that you enjoy this collection about the outreach-related accomplishments and impacts of our students, faculty, and alumni. Geographers certainly have a lot to offer the world. If you know of any outreach being done, especially by alumni, please let us know. As always, please stop by the department or contact us with updates about what you are doing.

Best wishes in 2018!
-Ron Kalafsky

Will you help support our efforts in geography outreach?
Please visit our website: geography.utk.edu.
Thanks for your support!
Study Abroad Experience Provides Invaluable Insights

From June 8 to July 2, 2017, Alex Webb, a sophomore geography major, traveled with four other students and Professor Micheline Van Reimsdijk to Oslo, Norway, and London for the Age of Migration course, which highlighted migration history and policies around the world and included extensive training in the use of qualitative research.

During the course, Webb focused her research on the following question: How are migrants affected by discrimination in Norway? She developed several new skills, including using qualitative methods, asking questions that provided her the answers needed for her research, and how to analyze the findings from her interviews.

“My interviewee said ‘The dominant idea is that there are no races, there is only one human race, and saying anything to the contrary can be interpreted as ‘racist’ in and of itself,’” Webb says. “Because race is a word that refers to this non-existent hierarchy based on the skin color of a person, race itself does not exist as a biological marker.”

In America, however, race is talked about so much that it is hard to put this into practice. In Norway, it is the complete opposite; the absence of the use of race and racism hinders action against discrimination. This encouraged Webb to focus future projects on the idea of whether the approach of ‘not seeing race’ is better than the approach of discussing it extensively. Both ways have visible issues, so what is the correct way? She explores this idea in her blog: tiny.utk.edu/AlexWebb.

In addition to her research, Webb also had the opportunity to apply her new qualitative research skills in her interactions with Norwegians. Webb also learned about the differences and significance between the definition of refugees compared to the definition of migrants. She gained a better understanding of the refugee process by meeting people that work with refugees and migrants every day at places such as health clinics in Norway and the Migration Museum. She also attended a panel discussion of refugees in London.

“It was through all three of these learning opportunities that I was able to best understand what we were studying inside the classroom would have been impossible to grasp without the study abroad trip,” Webb says. “Another important aspect of the study abroad experience was that I was able to interact, form relationships with, and learn from people from several different cultures I had not encountered before. This is invaluable for any person, but especially for a human geography major. This study abroad experience was a great opportunity. I was able to expand my geographic skill set and put it into practice in the field, which is so valuable and very unique to study abroad programs.”
Why We Need Outreach

While Tennessee has been busy stripping meaningful geography education from the curriculum of K-12 education, the need for geographers and geospatial professionals has continued to grow, leaving students at a significant disadvantage for future careers. Michael Camponovo, GIS outreach coordinator, and students in the GIS Outreach and Community Engagement Lab, are working to bridge the gap between students’ knowledge of geography and geospatial technology through several outreach initiatives.

Very few students enter the geography department as freshmen. Most students transfer in as upper classmen after taking a geography elective, indicating the need to promote geography and geospatial technology to students before they get to UT. In 2017, Camponovo and his team worked with more than 2,500 students in various outreach activities ranging from college and career fairs to direct classroom instruction.

“We hope that supporting these students will encourage them to continue their geography and geospatial education and choose our department for the foundation of their career,” Camponovo says.

The most successful program of 2017 was in conjunction with the Tennessee Geographic Alliance (TGA), UT College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, and Knox County Schools. More than 20 teachers spent seven days learning the skills necessary to collect and analyze geospatial data, produce maps and story maps, and incorporate GIS into their classrooms.

Camponovo and his team have also been working directly with the public to educate them on the need for geospatial professionals through examples directly related to their lives from ride sharing mobile apps like Uber to drones and self-driving cars.

They are also promoting geography through a variety of activities on campus. Between hosting special sessions for freshmen STEM students and GIS Day, they are exposing hundreds of students to geospatial technology and its use in a wide swath of disciplines and careers. They also continue to support students from other departments in their need for cartographic and data support.

“The success of the GIS and Community Outreach Lab over the last 18 months is a direct result of both the exciting research being conducted by our faculty, staff, and students as well as the foundation laid by the TGA,” Camponovo says. “As a result of combining our different strengths, we reached nearly 4,000 people over the course of 2017 in over 80 different events. More than 30 of those events included our new Augmented Reality Sandbox (pictured above). None of this would be possible without the Volunteer Spirit embodied by our department.”

For more information about geography and geospatial outreach events please contact outreach@utk.edu.

Be a GeoEvangelist

Geography has an image problem, especially in K-12 schools in Tennessee. Despite the best efforts of the Tennessee Geographic Alliance (TGA), since 2013, the required seventh grade stand-alone World Geography course has been eliminated from the curriculum and the number of high school elective World Geography courses offered have plummeted because it can no longer be taken as a required credit toward graduation. The only cohesive and meaningful geography instruction that a student will receive during their time in K-12 in Tennessee is in the third grade, unless they take Advanced Placement Human Geography in high school.

“This degradation of geography in the K-12 curriculum has a direct impact on the geography department because students are not adequately introduced to the discipline in middle or high school,” says Kurt Butefish, coordinator of TGA. “We have to actively educate students that geography is a viable career path and then recruit them into our programs of study.”

During the 2016-17 academic year, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) revised the Tennessee social studies standards, which the State Board of Education voted to accept. While significant rewriting of the standards occurred, the disturbing practice of hybridizing standards by rolling inadequate geography content into “history and geography” courses in middle and high school curriculum continued.
Reflections on a Publicly Engaged Geography

As President of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), Derek Alderman, professor of geography, spent the past several months traveling across the United States speaking at various geography departments, programs, and academic conferences calling on geographers to enhance their level of public engagement, communication and media savviness, and skills in advocacy and disciplinary promotion.

“Many geographers are already experienced in outreach, but there is room for even more geographers to advance the discipline’s place within public thought and debate,” Alderman says. “The ideas and skills of geographers have always been important and needed, but they are especially in high demand in these turbulent political times of climate change denial, unsustainable planning, and ever-widening social inequalities.”

Educating and collaborating with civic groups is critical to promoting what geography is, why it matters, and for whom it matters. Without a strong public identity, geography cannot hope to reclaim a position in the state public school curriculum, recruit the very best students to major in geography, or exert more influence over major questions and issues facing the world.

“As a white southern male, I seemed to be the most unlikely of people to talk about bringing greater justice to the representation of African American heritage,” Alderman says.

Yet, I have used my positionality to gain access to and educate audiences in some unexpected ways—always striving to speak in solidarity with rather than for communities of color.”

Geography students at UT are picking up valuable engagement skills and experiences. In October 2017, doctoral student Jordan Brasher and Alderman traveled to Virginia Tech to lead an invited teach-in on the removal of Confederate and other racially insensitive place names from campus buildings. Virginia Tech, like a growing number colleges across the United States in the wake of the Charlottesville tragedy, are searching for recommendations for how to study, contextualize, and even challenge landscape symbols that glorify white supremacy.

“The rewards of public engagement go much farther than bringing recognition to UT or putting professors and students in the spotlight,” Alderman says. “With every moment of public outreach comes an opportunity for the geographer to listen, as well as speak, and to learn about the world from someone else’s point of view. Overall, I believe public engagement has made me a better geographer and a better human being.”

To read more news about the Department of Geography, please visit us online. geography.utk.edu
DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Geographic Literacy Creates an Informed and Successful Community

IAN FEATHERS (’10) believes geography should be a core requirement in public schools and works with several schools in Sullivan County, Tennessee, to promote geography programming.

“Geography and supporting technologies like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) contribute to all aspects of our world, including natural resources and infrastructure,” says Feathers, a solution engineer in the Geodesign and Facilities Division at Esri. “Everything has a location that can be analyzed at many different scales. Geography is a comprehensive physical and social science that can be incorporated through STEM education, which presents a great opportunity for students to gain applicable skills throughout the public education system.”

The National Center for Children in Poverty reports approximately 26 percent of children in Tennessee live in poverty. In Sullivan County, 24 percent of children live in poverty and roughly 25 percent of adults have not obtained a high school diploma.

“There is an obvious relationship between educational attainment and poverty, and geography is the perfect academic discipline to help students in rural impoverished areas understand the types of issues that affect our communities and nation at large,” Feathers says. “Many people from East Tennessee have a deep connection to the land based on agrarian family history. We are resourceful, kind, and tough. These attributes help define us as ‘Appalachian,’ which is based on our geography.”

Geography is a large part of Feathers’ life’s work; a very important aspect of who he is and the change he wants to see in the world.

“It’s imperative that I share my knowledge and training in geography,” Feathers says. “My education becomes meaningless if I fail to share it with those who need it most. I encourage all alumni to donate their time and funds to geographic literacy and outreach programs through the Tennessee Geographic Alliance. Our future depends on it.”

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability Program Takes Root in Geography Department

Sustainability has roots in the study of sustainable development, which encompasses economic development, social development, and environmental protection – the three areas considered the three pillars of sustainability. As an interdisciplinary field, it has several career and graduate opportunities in biological and physical sciences, economics, geography, technology, engineering, social sciences, environmental resource management, and environmental policy.

The new sustainability degree within the Department of Geography explores a systems approach to understanding the connections among society, economic productivity, and environmental quality. By studying the three pillars of sustainability, students will be prepared to engage in Tennessee’s growing green economy.

There is a national trend for geography departments to create sustainability programs due to the overlapping knowledge bases with sustainability. Such knowledge bases include human and physical systems within local, regional, and global contexts, climate change, urban development, global economies, geographic information sciences, land-use and land-change, water resources, human-environment interactions, and social justice.

A core goal of the sustainability degree program is to improve undergraduate education continuously through experiential learning. The introductory sustainability course will provide students the opportunity to participate in service hours with a community partner. This experience engages students with civic-based learning and an opportunity to experience sustainability issues and solutions within the Knoxville community. A Field Experiences in Sustainability course will provide the opportunity for students to pursue sustainability-focused undergraduate research experiences or internships and prepare students for either graduate education or careers in sustainability-related fields.
FACULTY SPOTLIGHTS

Fire on the Mountain

“My Appalachia’s burning, there’s crimson on the mountain side... fire’s falling from the sky...” – Tuatha Dea

For more than 15 years, HENRI GRISSINO-MAYER, James R. Cox Professor of geography, warned of the possible dangers from a wildfire in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In November 2017, his prediction came true. When it was over, 14 people had perished and more than 2,500 structures had been completely incinerated. The damage is estimated at nearly $2 billion.

“We knew wildfire would return one day based on our ongoing fire history research, but not to this degree,” he says. “This caught everyone off guard.”

In his efforts to educate people about the extensive wildland-urban interface that exists in the southeast, Grissino-Mayer used the town of Gatlinburg as the “prime example” of where people could expect a future wildfire to cause major damage.

Grissino-Mayer, Sally Horn, professor of geography, Charles Lafon (‘00) of Texas A&M, and Chris Underwood (‘10) of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville learned about the history of past wildfires from tree-ring and sedimentary records found in the western portion of the national park. The soil charcoal record revealed a long history of wildfires dating back 10,000 years. Tree-ring records showed fire was a frequent disturbance in the forests of the national park, occurring about once every seven to 10 years until 1934 when the national park was established and all wildfires were extinguished as a matter of policy. For more than 80 years, fuels such as leaves and other brush built up in the park, which led Grissino-Mayer to predict wildfires would one day return to the forests around Gatlinburg.

Since the wildfire, Grissino-Mayer has been on a crusade to inform the public about the wildland-urban interface and how living in this type of environment means having to learn to live with the risk of wildfire. In December 2018, he received the College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Academic Outreach Research Award for his efforts.

Tornadoes Over Tennessee

Assistant Professor KELSEY ELLIS wants to make Tennessee residents safer during severe weather events. Tennessee, especially the Memphis area, and the rest of the southeast have the most fatalities due to tornadoes. Ellis and her collaborator, Lisa Reyes Mason, assistant professor in the College of Social Work, believe the high proportion of Tennessee tornadoes occurring at night may be a major cause.

With grant funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, they will test this hypothesis and identify ways to improve how people plan for and respond to tornado warnings. The collaborative project involves techniques from social and physical sciences and outreach to forecasters and the public. Preliminary findings suggest survey participants understand tornadoes happen at night, but underestimate how often tornadoes occur in the state.

Graduate students Daniel Burow and Kelly Gassert and undergraduates MonTre’ Hudson and Chesnea Skeen analyzed what types of storms are most likely to cause nocturnal tornadoes in Tennessee. They discovered that, climatologically, tornadoes at night are likely to be caused by linear events like squall lines.

Ellis and Mason interviewed National Weather Service forecasters across Tennessee and learned that two factors affected their ability to warn the public successfully. First, the type of storms that occur at night are challenging because tornadoes are weaker and spin up quickly. Another factor is the lack of storm spotters and the public witnessing tornadoes at night. Without storm reports, forecasters cannot be certain a tornado has been or is currently on the ground.

Results of the surveys will be used to develop an outreach program to inform vulnerable residents of their risk to tornadoes and to help them identify the safest actions to take during severe weather events. If successful, the program will serve as a model for other locations. Learn more about the project and results from each survey at tornadosafety.utk.edu.
The UT GIS Outreach and Community Engagement Lab is working to bridge the gap between students’ knowledge of geography and geospatial technology through several outreach initiatives.

Place Matters

LATITUDE: 35.956596  LONGITUDE: -83.927499