

A Relevant and Applicable Geography

Adriana Martinez, Geography, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Geography as a discipline combines the study of physical landscapes with examinations of culture and society, weaving together influences and outcomes to enable a more nuanced understanding of the world around us. It asks student to critically examine why certain phenomenon happen in one location and not another. Through this study, students begin to ask questions across a broad range of subjects that begin with the concept of place.

For example, the human-environment aspect of our program weaves two distinct sub disciplines together in a way which builds students' understanding of how society influences the landscape around us and how that landscape influences our actions. Geography trains students to be successful in many fields that look at aspects of our world with the human-environment lens. In particular, our program emphasizes Development Studies, Globalization Studies, Regional Geography, Sustainability, and Urban Studies. Each of these in their own way allows students to understand how their lives are impacted by the environment and society surrounding them. For example, one Area of Specialization (AOS) here in the Geography Department at SIUE, Sustainability, requires students to gain a breadth of knowledge in Geography-bridging Biogeography (GEOG 316) with the Geography of Food (GEOG 405) and Global Climate Change (GEOG 430) with the Geography of World Populations (GEOG 300). In addition, the University encourages Interdisciplinary Studies (IS) courses where two faculty members from departments across campus come together to teach a melded topic with cultural and environmental significance. The Sustainability AOS suggests Natural Resources: Issues and Conflicts (IS 334), Global Problems and Human Survival (IS 336) and Living Ecologically (IS 363). Through the Geography program and the Areas of Specializations available to students, students discover new ways to understand the world around them and gain the knowledge and skills to change that world for the better. Students see that Human-Environment relationships are important and the systems they have studied can affect lives. Through their geography courses, students learn about the impacts that complex human-environment relationships have and how these interactions impact their everyday lives.

Geography's strength, its breadth, is also sometimes a hindrance for minority students in that while a geography major is widely applicable, one career path is not always apparent. A small study conducted by a colleague of mine in the Geography Department at SIUE revealed that minorities in particular, including women students, were less likely to choose geography as a major because a career path was not clear. However, as a department, we have the opportunity to circumvent these misconceptions. For example, after taking our courses, students learn that previous graduates have gone on to use their geographic skills working at the Army Corps of Engineers, GeoEye, Missouri Botanical Gardens, the National Park Service, Census Bureau, Laclede Gas Company, Monsanto, Tetra Tech, the City of Belleville, Metro Transit St. Louis, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. Therefore, I believe that our program contributes to success in that once a direct career path is expressed to the students, it is clear that employment within the St. Louis area and elsewhere is attainable. In addition, the number of minority faculty members has a direct relationship with the number of minority students. For example, approximately 10 years ago multiple women were hired as faculty members and there was a

distinct increase in the number of female majors. Increasing minority faculty numbers will have an effect on minority student numbers as well.

Our Geography program also provides students with much needed skills in the workforce that make our graduates readily employable. One such skill is the ability to use geospatial technologies like GIS (Geographic Information Systems) to address problems and devise solutions. Many employers in the St. Louis area and elsewhere are in need of students that possess these skills. Our geographers also learn critical thinking skills throughout their coursework and particularly when conducting their capstone course-the Senior Assignment (SA). During SA, students work one on one with a faculty member to address a problem, which includes data collection, processing, and analysis. The department as a whole gathers at the end of each semester so students can showcase their final product. Here the students learn to examine a problem, devise methods and present their work to a broad audience, all skills required by employers. In addition, students learn technical skills during their project, such as data analysis, and work one on one with a faculty member, building their skills to work in groups and with colleagues. While often under appreciated by students, "soft skills" such as problem solving and working well with colleagues are highly valued by potential employers.