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This newsletter is produced by the Information Committee, which consists of faculty members Elizabeth Havice (Co-chair and Editor), Jun Liang (Co-Chair), Scott Kirsch, Nina Martin and graduate student Michelle Padley.
As I write, Spring is in full force here in Chapel Hill. Flowers are blooming, the campus quads are filled with students, and everyone is celebrating Tarheel basketball!

I’m pleased to bring you the 2017 newsletter highlighting the work of undergraduate students, and friends for their financial support.

Geography is grateful to its alumni and friends for their financial support.

We depend on alumni and friends for their financial support.

Please visit our department website (geography.unc.edu) regularly to learn more news and profiles of geography faculty, graduate students, and alumni -- keep them coming, we love hearing from you!

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We depend on alumni and friends like you to help meet our ever-increasing needs. Your gift to the Department can help us meet many goals.

Online giving is easy and secure by logging onto geography.unc.edu, make-a-gift-to-geography/ for information and links. You can also use the envelope attached to this newsletter. Feel free to email or call me to talk about our programs. And if you are ever in Chapel Hill, please visit us.

Greetings from
UNC GEOGRAPHY!

Friends of geography celebrate DR. STEPHEN BIRDSALL’S 50 YEARS AT UNC

On December 2nd, 2016, classmates gathered in celebration of Dr. Birdsall’s 50 years of service at UNC. Dr. Birdsall delivered the Annual Doug Eyre Distinguished Lecture, which was endowed in honor of John D. “Doug” Eyre, who was not only the first chair of the geography department but held that position when Birdsall was first hired. Since that time, Birdsall has been a prominent figure on campus and in the discipline. He offered 14 years of service in the South Building as Senior Associate Dean, and has expanded that work to the United States. The newsletter will also take you inside the office just about every day, underscoring the importance of undergraduate education at UNC as well as a distinguished alumnus.

Dr. Stephen Birdsall’s 50-year milestone at UNC is celebrated in Chapel Hill. While he is officially retired he is still teaching and is in the office just about every day. Undergraduate Morehead-Chain Fellow Martha Loesau has focused on urban geography and will pursue a career in transportation planning — but in the mean time, she will live and work in Asia as the recipient of a prestigious Luce Scholarship.

The innovative research of Dr. Betsy Olson is highlighted; she spent much of her early academic career in the United Kingdom where one of her specialties was on the geography of youth caregivers (children who need to care for adults or other children) and she has expanded that work to the United States. The newsletter will take you inside Dr. Galvada Velden’s first year seminar on nature and society and give you a peek into graduate student Danae Scott’s work on the historical rural black community roads in the Jim Crow South, as well as graduate student Matt Dannenberg’s research on how forest data interact with climate and hydrological systems.

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When asked to reflect on his work and legacy, Birdsall noted his feeling of accomplishment at rebuilding his teaching and research portfolio after working in administration for many years. To do so, he brought the efforts together; he taught courses that integrated his new research on rural North Carolinians’ experiences of work and published articles on methods for integrating research and teaching. He cites the opportunity to try new challenges and take on new roles as a great joy of work at UNC because they entail, “reading, talking, listening to people, exploring out in the field, sitting quietly and thinking and then translating all of this into the classroom, course projects and research publications.” Birdsall’s success is evident: his courses on Cultural Landscapes and World Regional Geography are bursting at the seams and in 2007 he was awarded the annual Board of Governor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, which recognized him for excellent and exceptional undergraduate teaching over a sustained period of time.

Cutting his geographic tooth in the field as a physical geographer, Birdsall has since explored culture, landscapes, why places matter and how they are formulated through inter-personal relationships in time and space. His public talk in December entitled Wayfaring: Places, Limits, Purposes left the audience with the message that the joy of life is in the journey, not the destination. When asked where journeys in retirement might take him, his response was one of a wanderer musing on places he’d like to go and people he’d like to see. Yet, his Tarheel ties are strong and when pressed he responded, “Who’s retiring?”

Michael Erin
Professor and Chair, UNC-CH Department of Geography

department news

DR. ERIKA WISE received the New Jerley Crime Rate, Population Change, and Distance Between Law Enforcement.”

Graduate student PRISCILLA VAZ received the Tanner award for excellence in undergraduate teaching by graduate teaching assistants.

Graduate student TREY MURPHY won second place in the UNC Innovative Use of GIS competition for her research on the “Ownership and Spatial Distribution of Mineral Wealth in the Eagle Ford Shale (Texas, USA).”

Geography major J汉娜 SCHAFER won first place in the UNC GIS Day mapping competition for her work on “Frier Jony Crime Rate, Population Change, and Distance Between Law Enforcement.”

DR. ERIN WISE discussed tree coring on an episode of the Travel Channel’s “Expedition Unknown” about the Lost Colony of Roanoke.

Graduate student ANGIS LYALL represented the Natural Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant as well as Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship for his work on the contentious migrations between Indigenous groups and the Guarani people over oil production in the Amazon.

Graduate student MARK ODETT represented the American Association of Geographers at the Climate Reality Project’s Leadership Corps Training held in Houston, Texas.
Alex, the younger of two sons of Julian ’55 and Josie Robertson, founders of the Robertson Scholars Program, has continued his parents’ legacy of giving through his own generosity to UNC’s department of geography each year since 2004.

“My high school’s motto was ‘be worthy of your heritage’ and Carolina is definitely part of my heritage and I’m very proud of that association. I want to help the institutions that helped me in my life and Carolina is certainly at the top of my list.”

Since graduating, Robertson has built a lifelong interest in history and geography inspired Robertson to major in both. “I always liked history, and I think geography I inherited from my dad. He’s always had an interest in places, in seeing and experiencing different landscapes and climate,” he said.

“A lifelong interest in history and geography inspired Robertson to major in both. “I always liked history, and I think geography I inherited from my dad. He’s always had an interest in places, in seeing and experiencing different landscapes and climate,” he said.

“It was daunting and overwhelming but also fun because I had grown up being a Carolina basketball fan and finally got to see the Dean Dome, walk around the campus and meet some alumni relatives. His first visit to campus was as a young teen to watch a basketball game coached by Dean Smith.

“When Robertson began considering colleges as an upperclassman at Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, Carolina was on his list. “I wanted a different climate culturally and geographically,” he said.

“New York is a melting pot and people come from all over, so it helps me connect to people to know a little about where they’re from, whether it’s the city they’re from, the geography, the economy or natural resources. In New York City, two out of five people haven’t been born in this country. It’s great to be able to connect with them by knowing about where they’re from. It can be a gateway and potentially open doors.”

Robertson advises current UNC students to study abroad and take advantage of their opportunities before settling on a career.

“I’ve learned to look at health spatially, and to understand that health equity has a lot to do with access to resources that is very dependent upon where you live. I’ve learned to use GIS mapping software. I’ve used GIS to add visuals to my research to communicate more powerfully with target audiences.

Geography incorporates what’s best about the Liberal Arts and Sciences. Geography is philosophical and numerical; visual, lyrical and elusive. It’s a discipline that, above all, demands curiosity. The Department’s faculty foster a culture of dialogue and inquisitiveness, which makes for animated and interesting class environments. It’s fun!”

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News & Highlights, continued...
How is it possible to learn about historic wagon roads in rural North Carolina which are no longer in use, roads which may never have appeared on any map? For Geography doctoral candidate Darius Scott, the answer is by talking with people, and listening to stories about “back ways” that have been passed down for generations.

Drawing on methods honed as a research assistant, Darius Olson, the director of Oral History Programs at UNC’s Ph.D. research, “Exploring the Back Way: An Analysis of Wagon Roads in Rural African American Communities” attempts to understand the complex meanings of these roads for those who experienced them— as landscapes of racial segregation but also as spaces of commercial exchange and relative safety. Their stories are providing Darius with a rich source of information about how the back ways were used.

Darius, who grew up in Oxford, North Carolina, hopes his research will help to break down divides and raise new questions about past uses of place and experience. He became interested in the wagon roads out of “a concern that what we learn from basic scholarship about African American history and places often don’t fit what I heard growing up about, the very same times and sorts of places. I think the US’ historical imaginary poorly accommodates the complexity of topics like segregation.” His research has been supported through a Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship and Social Science Research Council Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship.

What drew Darius when he’s not recovering is particular interest in what she calls ‘Bookend Caregiving’ relationships, which entail youth caregivers providing essential care to aging adults, while also receiving care in return. Professor Olson draws these issues together to consider how ethical conceptions of care in moral philosophy might help us understand the new and emerging conditions of global caregiving.

People who first hear about her work often ask her, “How is what you do geography?” She has a ready answer - there are few fields that provide the theoretical and empirical tools to connect intimate experiences of a child caregiver with larger scales of economic, political, and social change. This is also true for her contributions to research on contemporary religion in which she draws on ideas of everyday religiosity and landscape to explore how young people create new practices and spiritual spaces and use participatory research methods like film-making to make abstract ideas more concrete.

What does Professor Olson think is the best thing about working in UNC’s geography? She says, “Our students, hands down.” She frequently brings geography majors to work with her on her research projects, and loves that our students, from first year undergraduates to Ph.Ds, are always willing to try out new experiments in research-led, participatory learning.
NATURE-SOCIETY FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR

The students in Professor Gabriela Valdivia’s first-year seminar on Nature and the Problem of Its Preservation spent the fall semester grappling with Professor Valdivia’s provocation that, “nature is not only a thing that’s ‘out there’ with boundaries that are fixed and separate from people. Nature is always being transformed by relationship among people and by our values.” In class, students grappled with ideas about property and a range of approaches to natural resource management and were tasked with a semester-long study on the human relationship with oil. Working closely with UNC librarians Matt Jansen, Amanda Henley, and Phil McDaniels, Valdivia developed a dataset tracking the movement of oil shipping containers over a ten-year period to use for spatial analysis; research students used the data to identify a site where the oil hadTC1 spilled and then explored the kinds of transformations that unfurled around oil in that place.

As is the norm for Carolina’s exceptional students and especially our curious and innovative Geographers, the students rose to the challenge, a particularly impressive feat given that it was their first semester at Carolina. Throughout the course, many had no prior experience working with spatial and quantitative data or the subject matter. They worked with Dr. Valdivia and graduate student Maia Call to develop research questions and hone analytical skills in the use of spatial and quantitative data tools, including by providing a large sink for anthropogenic emissions of CO2. Changes in temperature and hydroclimate are likely to affect the functioning of forests and other ecosystems, but there remains significant disagreement over whether the positive influence of climate change on vegetation will outweigh its negative consequences.

First-year Lucy Min and her group compared the economic, cultural and environmental effect of large scale oil refineries on two of the largest port cities in the US: El Segundo, CA and Houston, TX. The group expected to find that the oil industries would boost the local economies but weren’t sure what to expect in terms of cultural and social impacts. According to Min, “The most interesting part of the research was finding out that the oil companies have many programs to benefit people living in the port cities, such as health educational programs or cultural celebration events. It was also interesting to weigh the cons of having large scale refineries, like the negative effects on the environment against the positive boosts, such as jobs, that they can provide in the economy.’”

First-year student, Lucy Min, first-year student

Hear from a student in the seminar.

**THIS COURSE…PUSHED ME TO THINK ABOUT TOPICS LIKE PROPERTY RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THAT I WOULD NEVER HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT IF IT WERENT FOR THE READINGS AND DISCUSSIONS WE HAD IN PROFESSOR VALDIVIA’S CLASS.**

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**Matt Dannenberg**

I earned my B.A. in English and Philosophy from a small liberal arts college (Hope College), but discovered after graduation that I was most interested in environmental science. I began taking GIS and remote sensing classes at UNC in 2013/14 before becoming a full-time graduate student in 2011. I finished my B.A. in Geography in 2013 and will finish my Ph.D. this year. I use tree rings and satellite imagery to examine how humans interact with other parts of the Earth system, particularly with the climate system and hydrological systems. My work mostly focuses on how demographic, economic, and social factors influence vegetation phenology and productivity in dry regions of western North America.

**Why is this research important?**

Forests provide many goods and services that humans and other animals rely upon, including by providing a large sink for anthropogenic emissions of CO2. Changes in temperature and hydroclimate are likely to affect the functioning of forests and other ecosystems, but there remains significant disagreement over whether the positive influence of climate change on vegetation will outweigh its negative consequences.

I am currently pursuing tenure-track positions at research universities; so interviews have demanded quite a bit of attention recently and I’ve been enjoying working on my scientific communication skills. When not working, I also make time for swimming, disc golf, playing card and board games, and reading science fiction and fantasy novels.

**What’s next for Matt Dannenberg?**

I plan to pursue a position in academia.

Dennenberg collecting an increment core in a Pandas Pine in Washington, DC

**Tell us about your background and how you became interested in UNC Geography Graduate Program.**

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WHERE DO YOU COME FROM AND WHERE DO YOU NOW CALL HOME?

I grew up north of Baltimore, Maryland, and I still consider Baltimore my home, although I feel strong ties to the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area as well. Seeing my professors on the bike path, eating croissants outside at Weaver Street Market, running on the Bolin Creek Trail, and sitting in the courtyard between Hurston and Murphey Halls make UNC feel like home too.

AMONG OTHER UNIVERSITIES YOU APPLIED TO, WHY DID YOU CHOOSE UNC-CH?

I chose UNC-CH because I was attracted to the idea of learning about a place (I suppose I was a geographer from the start). At UNC, I have friends from around the state - Charlotte, Raleigh, Asheville, Wilmington, and have learned about the food, music, and politics in regions of North Carolina. The relaxed nature of UNC also appealed to me. I have never felt a competitive spirit from other classmates. In fact, I find that some of my best learning and discovery occurs from working with my peers, such as studying for statistics with classmates or diving into a global value chain research project with a group partner.

WHAT DO YOU BRING TO GEOGRAPHY AT UNC? HOW HAS STUDying GEOGRAPHY HERE INFLUENCED YOU?

My geography studies focus on urban geography and planning. Geography has given me the critical, theoretical framework to analyze more technical aspects of the built environment. As I pursue a career as a transportation planner, I hope to incorporate the economic geography principles and research strategies learned at UNC. My thesis in Geography centers on barriers to cycling within the Burmese-originated refugee community in Chapel Hill-Carrboro; it pairs transportation geography theory with physical infrastructure considerations.

WHAT GEOGRAPHIC SKILLS AND IDEAS HAVE YOU ENGAGED?

During the fall of my junior year, I studied abroad with the School of International Training, and lived with families in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Dakar, Senegal, and Hanoi, Vietnam. My mapping skills, consideration of everyday practices of residents, and understanding of historical global economic policies and world systems theory, made me able to experience neighborhoods as learning labs. In the spring semester, I included these geographic skills in the C-Start (Carolina Students Taking Academic Responsibility Through Teaching) class that I taught about concepts of home and sense of place.

WHERE DOES A UNC GEOGRAPHY MAJOR TAKE YOU, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE?

I have recently learned that I have been selected as a Luce Scholar! The Luce Scholars Program is designed to enhance the understanding of Asia among potential leaders in American Society. I will spend a year living and working in the field of transportation planning in a city in Asia and will also receive language training.

AMONG OTHER MAJORS AT UNC, WHY DID YOU CHOOSE GEOGRAPHY?

Older students involved in activism, research, and projects studied Geography, and I asked them about what drew them to the major. Each responded with an entirely different answer, and I realized Geography’s interdisciplinary quality would provide diverse perspectives to my study of the production of space.

Martha Isaacs, standing outside of Baltimore’s Penn Station. Isaacs notes the line of taxis waiting to pick people up from the station. As a self-proclaimed ‘transportation nerd’, she ponders their fate as new Transportation Network Companies like Uber and Lyft become viable first/last mile options.