Advising Focus: Human Geography and Robert Ostergren

Robert Ostergren is the current advisor for the Human Geography Focus. We asked him to describe the Focus, and share any recommendations he had for those interested in Human Geography.

Please give a brief description of the Human Geography discipline.

As the term suggests, Human Geography is that part of the discipline which concerns itself with developing a geographic understanding of human thoughts and activities – whether they be historical, cultural, political, economic, social or environmental. In our department, human geography covers a broad range of topics and interests. We offer both general and advanced courses across the spectrum of urban, economic, political, social and cultural geography. Depending on individual interests, students may choose courses that focus on such diverse topics or issues as urban development and planning, migration, the impacts of globalization, the geography of communication and technology, labor geography, geographies of nationalization, gender, and ethnicity, geographic theory and philosophy, as well as past and present geographies of culture and landscape.

What are the program’s strengths?

Certainly one strength of our program is its breadth. As one of the nation’s premiere departments, we are big enough to cover most aspects of this large and dynamic sub-disciplinary area. At the same time, students may find that their interests may push them towards taking additional or advanced course work in some specific area of human geography.

Are there any classes within the Geography department that you feel are fundamental?

Of the intermediate level courses regularly offered, I think students benefit a great deal from taking 305, 312, or 318. These are broad-based survey courses that lead to more advanced work in the respective areas of urban, economic or political geography. The 236 Bascom course can be an excellent introduction to thinking critically about the field of human geography and many of its core concerns.

Is there any special advice that you would give for students planning on post-graduate work?

For those planning on post-graduate work, I would recommend that students do everything possible to strengthen the depth of their preparation in the sub-field (e.g., take more than the required number of courses in the emphasis area, add complementary coursework in related disciplines, develop relevant technical or linguistic skills, consider doing a senior honors thesis, or if nothing else read extensively in your area of interest).

Is there any other advice that you’d like to give to students?

I’ve already made the point several times, but will say it once again. Come in and talk with your advisor. We see a lot of our students, but not nearly enough.

Interview by Jen Bruce.

The Geography of …

Christmas in the U.S.

America has always been a melting pot of cultures, with people of different nationalities settling all across the land. It should come as no surprise, then, that our Christmas traditions are as varied by cultural heritage as they are by location.

In New York City, holiday shoppers stop to watch skaters on the ice in front of the tree at Rockefeller Center while others gaze in awe at the magnificent Neapolitan Baroque figures on the Angel Tree at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In Texas, one can join a Tex-Mex “posada” in San Antonio or travel 70 miles north to Fredericksburg for a German-style Christmas Market.

The South has a long Christmas tradition going back to the first English Christmas at Jamestown. Today in New Orleans, thousands of carolers gather each year in Jackson Square for a huge community sing while bonfires are lit all along the Mississippi River.

In Salt Lake City, the great classical music of Christmas is presented by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. At the same time, a small choir in St. Joseph’s Church in Washington, New Jersey sings “Silent Night” while bathed in the light of an antique stained glass window depicting the Nativity.

In Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry, an enchanted forest of 43 international trees and three crèches decorated by the city’s cultural community groups is on display through January 7. Appropriate ethnic food is served in the cafeteria and various ethnic groups present folk dances and story hours throughout the season.

In Washington, DC, the focal point of the season is the lighting of the tree on the Ellipse. A large tree represents the nation with smaller trees representing each state. While the Kennedy Center presents a wide-variety of Christmas programs, the hottest ticket in town is for the “Messiah” sing-in at the concert hall. Boston is also famous for its annual Christmas presentation of “Messiah” by the Handel-Haydn Society as well as the caroling festivities on Beacon Hill.

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, founded by Moravian missionaries on Christmas Eve in 1741, starts off the season with a huge Christmas Market. The holiday decorations in most buildings in the city consist of a single candle in each window. A giant lighted star can be seen atop South Mountain and is visible for twenty miles.

St. Augustine, Florida, the oldest city in the U.S., has the entire historic area draped in white lights. There is a city ordinance which prevents anyone from displaying outdoor Christmas lights that are not white. The one exception is in the Live Oak town square, where a colorfully decorated tree is set up beneath more white lights hung from the town’s famous ancient oak trees.

The “Nation’s Christmas Tree” in California’s Kings Canyon National Park is the site of a special annual celebration. Carolers sing at the base of the 267-foot sequoia each year and the size of the group depends on the depth of the heavy snows in the park.

Since colonial times, the holiday traditions of nearly every nation on earth have moved into, around, and across the U.S. Every ethnic group has its place in our society, and they bring their own traditions for December celebrations. In addition, the diversity in our climate helps to set the stage for various types of festivities ranging from a picnic on the beach at Waikiki or Key West to candles in a window during the twilight of a cold day in Alaska.

By Aaron Stephenson, after Bill Egan “Christmas in the United States”
News from GIS Day

At the November 19th GIS Day in Memorial Union's Great Hall, a representative of the Wisconsin Land Information Association made a proposal to members of the Geography Club. As the next generation of geographers and geographic and land information users, she encouraged a closer relationship between the WLIA and the Geography Club. She offered to have WLIA members speak to the Club about real-world geographic issues, as well as invited the Club to tour local public agencies (City of Madison agencies, Dane County LIO, State of Wisconsin DET and DNR) to see geography at work. Contact information was exchanged, and the proposal was brought before the entire Club and met an enthusiastic reception. The matter will be pursued next semester.

Congratulations to our two Graduating Seniors!

Marie Peppler, Physical Geography
Marie will be working full-time at the U.S. Geological Survey in Middleton until next fall, when she hopes to return to the UW to pursue a Masters in fluvial geomorphology. Special thanks to Marie for all her energy and leadership during her involvement with the Club.

Nate Gauger, Cartography/GIS
"After I am turned adrift on December 21, my future is unclear. For me, my relative dearth of plans is exciting. For all I know I could be out east, west, or move approximately 4 blocks. I would like to relocate to Colorado, and am in the process of looking for work there in Cartography and/or GIS. If gainful employment doesn't materialize quickly, however, I may just move there regardless and become a snowboard bum. I have been encouraged by most of peers to take this opportunity to break the mold and see the world from a different perspective. If I get the job I am really gunning for in Eagle County, Colorado (home of the Kobe Bryan trial), that perspective may be found at 6,600 feet."

UPCOMING GEOGRAPHY CLUB NEWS AND EVENTS

Final meeting on Monday, Dec. 8th. Come wish our December graduates well!
We’re treating our graduating seniors for an evening out on the town. Meet us in the Student Lounge at 6:00, and we’ll head out to State Street from there.

Have a happy and safe winter break. Keep your eyes peeled next semester for the first Geography Club meeting!

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS ...

Find this place ... win a FREE COW T-SHIRT!

Welcome to Madison Geography’s first Photo Contest. Above is a picture taken somewhere in, around or near Science Hall. The first undergrad to correctly identify the location will win a free short-sleeved Wisconsin Geography cow t-shirt (winner will have the choice of size and color). Winner will be notified by email. Good luck!

HOW TO PLAY:
Find where the picture was taken
Email your answer to uwgeogclub@yahoo.com
Win a free short-sleeved cow t-shirt!

Contest not open to graduate students, faculty or staff.