ENS Newsletter

SPRING 2015

Department of Environmental Studies
University of Illinois at Springfield

Welcome from the Chair

As I write this, the state budget is still not set. Proposed cuts to higher education of 31.5% would be devastating. Instead of thinking about that, I prefer to focus on the positives—who we are.

The number of graduate students in the department has been decreasing since 2010, but with the addition of our bachelor’s degree and graduate certificate in GIS, the number of courses taught and credit hours generated have significantly increased. Hopefully those numbers will allow us to hire a new faculty member.

Who are those ENS students? Undergraduates average 24 years in age and two-thirds attended a community college. After only two years, ENS BA students at UIS outnumber those majoring in “traditional” disciplines such as philosophy and economics and those pursuing the “hot” fields like management information systems.

Our graduate students average 34 years in age, and come from a wide array of undergraduate backgrounds, ranging from biology to theater.

ENS undergraduates overwhelming come from within Illinois, while a slight majority of graduate students come from out of state. In the case of both undergraduates and graduate students, females outnumber males 2 to 1.

Ultimately, it’s not about the numbers; I instead prefer to hear the stories. This newsletter includes just a small subset of those. It’s exciting to see our students make presentations at professional conferences and to hear about successes of our alumni. I hope if you have such stories that you will share with me so that I can share with your peers.

-Dennis Ruez, Jr.

ALUMNI FOCUS: Chad LaMontagne

What is your educational history?
I graduated from Argenta-Oreana High School in Macoupin County. I spent the next five years in the United States Marine Corps and enrolled at SIUC where I obtained a B.S. in Plant & Soil Science with a specialization in Environmental Studies. I stayed on for graduate studies in Soil Science, but while I was unable to finish that degree due to life getting in the way, I was able to eventually transfer those credits to UIS and complete my M.A. in Environmental Studies at UIS via the online option.

What is your work history after UIS?
I left SIUC and began working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service as a soil conservation technician in Anna, Illinois. I stayed in Anna until 2010 when I transferred to Waterloo, Illinois. My MA from UIS allowed me to advance into a soil conservationist position in Breese, IL, in 2012 where I worked until May of 2015. I recently accepted a position as a regulatory specialist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in St. Louis.
My primary duties as a soil conservation technician (SCT) were to inventory natural resource problems with Food Security Act (Farm Bill) participants, and then design the treatments to correct those problems, be it via structural engineering practices or agronomic vegetative practices. The SCT is typically the employee who spends the most time out in the field and interacts with the clients more than the others. That’s not to say there isn’t office work utilizing ArcGIS or other agency software, but they are the public face of the agency.

The soil conservationist (SC) is primarily involved in long term conservation planning for the clients. They obtain benchmark conditions for the landowner’s property, help the client set future natural resource goals, and then cooperatively develop a plan to achieve those goals for the farming or ranching operation. It’s a challenging task as it involves working knowledge of plants, soils, drainage, forestry, livestock, engineering, and technology used to collect and present data. In addition to the biological or engineering sciences, program participation requires the SC to be familiar with federal and state regulations, and the ability to navigate the administrative hurdles involved with federal contracts in the instances where financial assistance is provided.

While there are difficulties working through various federal and state programs, there is a definite sense of accomplishment. Results are measurable and often highly visible. Soil erosion is reduced, water quality and air quality is improved, overall levels of management and stewardship of these farms is increasing. It’s a good feeling that you’re actually making a difference.

While my previous experience involved voluntary participation of landowners, my current position has more regulatory “teeth”. As a regulatory specialist my authority is provided by the Clean Water Act (CWA), which regulates the discharge of dredged or fill material into waters. A permitting process has been set up for individuals looking to perform work in protected wetlands, and my job involves accepting and evaluating those permit applications by administering the day to day program, conducting or verifying Corps jurisdictional determinations, and enforcing the provisions of section 404 of the CWA.

Why did you choose ENS at UIS?

My mother had received a M.B.A. from Sangamon State University as it transitioned into the University of Illinois program and always spoke well of this institution. As it turned out, she was correct. UIS had an online master’s degree in an environmental field, which appealed to me. I felt that I had a pretty good handle on the technical aspects of working in this industry, but my exposure to policy was very minimal when I started.

What did you like about the ENS department at UIS?

I knew all of my professors during my undergraduate studies, and it was very much the same at UIS. From the department chair on down, my emails were quickly and efficiently answered, and I was never left feeling that I was alone or unvalued. I felt like part of the ENS family from day one and often regretted being off site as I couldn’t participate in the social functions. It was clear, however, that online only students were given the same level of support, and sometimes more so depending upon unique circumstances as traditional students. Several of my colleagues have experience in other online programs, and none of them had the positive experience with course work or correspondence that I had.

How did the ENS department prepare you for a career and life out of school?

I have told anyone who will listen that the greatest lesson I learned from my time with UIS was critical thinking. Everyone always thinks they’re fantastic at it, I know I sure did, but that wasn’t exactly the case. Every class, every instructor knew their students were coming in with preconceived notions. That was fine, you just needed to articulate the basis for your opinions. It was truly eye opening, and I’ve applied that skill in many ways since leaving the department.

Did ENS help prepare you for your career?

Dr. Ruez’s influence was critical. Additionally, there were two other staff members not currently with UIS. I can’t recall their names off the top of my head, but their classes were HARD. Not academically, those concepts were easy enough to master, but specifically because they made us think differently than we were used to. Biases had to be left behind. Answers had to be justified. These courses opened us up to methods of problem solving that were new to all the students. All the faculty brought on in my time with the ENS department were top notch.
ALUMNI FOCUS: Dr. Ryan Taylor

Ryan Taylor is an Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at Purchase College, State University of New York. Dr. Taylor received his BS in Biology-Environmental Studies at Mt. Vernon Nazarene College, Ohio, MA in Environmental Studies at the University of Illinois Springfield, and PhD in Environmental Science at Oregon State University.

I grew up in a shuttered steel-mill town along the Ohio River in the Appalachian region of Ohio. From my perspective, a place like Springfield, Illinois might have well been as far away as Beijing (or maybe more appropriate for the time - Moscow). The economy of my hometown was ravaged and had been in a strong steady decline for over 20 years. The stench and discoloration of the sky from the air pollution of the remaining industry was so thick, you could cut it with a knife. The volume of rubbish and trash in the local streams actually provided most of the in-stream structural habitat for local fish and wildlife. Abandoned factories that would become brownfields and superfund sites were the secret playgrounds and swimming holes we didn't dare tell our parents we snuck into, and education was not exactly the highest priority on anyone's list. Government assistance had become a multi-generational way of life, and the lack of hope was visible in everyone's eyes.

Still, it was a tight-knit community. It had to be. Nobody new ever moved in (there were no jobs). There was also a tremendous amount of school and town pride (they were one and the same in that county). That pride was not about the future though. It was about the glory of the past and attention was generally focused on the spectacle of the evening high school soccer match or basketball game (local schools had lost the funding necessary to field football teams, years before I came up through the ranks). Academics were a staple, but not a priority for social advancement. Students took classes from the same teachers who taught their parents. All the school-houses were built in the 1920's, and while they had been maintained, they had never been updated. In many ways, if you walked into classroom, everything was exactly the same as it was 50 years prior. All the surnames were even the same on the rolls, there were just fewer of them. That is how I came to graduate 3rd from a class of 32 in a public high school, during a period when school districts elsewhere in the country were consolidating in order to gain new facilities and take advantage of the economies of scale associated with shared resources.

Spending one’s formative years in a place that has as few opportunities which are available in that part of the country, under the kind of stifling socio-ecological conditions present at the time, has the effect of narrowing your horizons. The imagined boundaries for what you conceive as possible for yourself and for the future in general become as real as any tangible boundaries created by rivers or mountain ridges. Sure, I knew where Illinois was on a map. Most of us did. The problem was that none had any hope of ever going there someday. We knew Abraham Lincoln made his mark in Springfield and his grave could still be found there, but Cincinnati was as far west as anyone could conceive of going. For most of us, that was a city of such enormous size you wouldn’t want to go there too often either for fear of losing yourself. You could forget about Chicago. Chicago was a place reserved for film, or television. It was a backdrop for dramatic fiction, not a place someone could really visit.

Despite these narrow horizons, and with much family encouragement and support, I was able to attend and succeed in college. Don’t get me wrong, there were some hiccups along the way. I was placed in remedial Spanish (and English); I flunked out of my first attempt at calculus; and I was on academic probation before I was done with my first term. I had effectively washed out of an engineering program I thought I wanted to be in, almost as fast as I had been admitted to it. Yet, when it was all over (four years, one college, and three majors later), I was still standing, and in a position to consider graduate school. My GPA and GRE scores were good enough, and I’d proven myself to be capable in the lab with my advising faculty. It just wasn’t on my radar at the beginning of my academic career as something to consider or plan for. How could it have been?

When I finally opened my eyes enough to begin investigating graduate programs seriously during my senior year of college (after telling my advisor repeatedly, that path...
Ryan Taylor, Continued

was not for me) I was drawn immediately to the ENS program at UIS. The funny thing was, I had seen promotional materials for the program much earlier in my college career, which had piqued my interest at the time, but it was all branded under the college's original moniker of Sangamon State University (SSU). I was young, idealistic, and maybe a bit clueless at the time. Like most matriculating undergraduates, my mind and focus was on a million different things, so it took a little bit for me to connect the dots that the two programs were actually one in the same. As an out-of-state student, the idea that this SSU program which I was already interested in from a curricular perspective now had the international clout and recognition behind it of the full University of Illinois brand increased my enthusiasm about the program. Illinois was still a far way away, but I was more confident than I was in high school, and less worried about not knowing anyone or being isolated in a sea of cornfields. So, I decided to toss my hat into the ring to see if I could make it as a scholar in a graduate program. If I failed, it wouldn't be the first time, and I had learned that I could recover from failure if it came.

As it turned out, the ENS program of the 1990's was a perfect fit for me! There was no rocky-entry this time. The focus of the curriculum and most of the projects graduate students were working on were right in my wheelhouse. Everything appeared to be very applied in nature. I deeply valued the kind of real-world approach the program took, and it worked for me. It made the material we studied and the theory we practiced more meaningful. That's really the kind of professional I saw myself being when I graduated, and it was quickly obvious to me that this program was going to equip me from that. In fact, it seemed to be designed for that. The block-evening class schedules (although brutal) gave me time to work half-time with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as a Graduate Public Service Intern (GPSI) which paid for my education. The majority of the colleagues I took classes with were already professionals in their fields, so my social/professional network grew immediately (there was no Facebook, LinkedIn, or actually anything much at all on the internet in those days). The faculty I worked with, having themselves been practicing professionals before coming to the program, put a different and more practical spin on classes than I had expected. There was also flexibility, which we had to implement a project, instead of writing a theoretical thesis. All these attributes made the ENS program a place where we DID environmental studies... not just studied it! Those qualities had nothing to do with the program being a part of the University of Illinois, or Sangamon State. It had to do with the faculty and the kind of scholarly pursuits they specifically supported and valued.

It's easy to say that I am who my own students know me to be today, because of the time I spent at UIS. Because of the value the ENS program placed on graduate students applying their knowledge and skills, my career path has not been that of most of the tenured faculty which I work with today. Whereas many of my current colleagues in the Liberal Arts and Sciences went straight through from their Bachelors to their PhDs and most only have experience conducting research in academic labs and facilities, my time at UIS showed me that is not the only path, nor is it necessarily the right path for someone in the field of Environmental Studies. There is just too much work that needs done, and too much opportunity to affect change for everyone to stay in academia their entire career. That's why Bill Warren (who taught me how to conduct aerial interpretation and use GIS before ESRI was a household name) also facilitated transportation planning. It's also why Luther Skelton (my most beloved advisor) served as an inter-basin water planner in addition to researching the theoretical possibilities of converting the nation's energy grid from fossil fuels to a solar-hydrogen economy. The latter was some brilliant work; by the way, I still talk about his research in this field to my own students. When I was at UIS, I always had the impression that I was learning from do-ers. The ENS faculty was made of Academics who had been in the trenches during the formulation of most of our nation's key environmental policies and programs. I always felt quite honored to be in their classes, and that I was learning something a little special because it incorporated so much first-hand experience.

When I graduated with honors from the ENS program at the end of the decade, UIS did not offer a PhD in Environmental Studies, nor did I have a vision of pursuing such a degree. I wanted to get my hands dirty applying what I had learned about environmental policy implementation and program administration. I wanted to do what had been modeled for me by my previous GPSI sponsor (and amazing mentor) Marvin Hubbell. I stayed with the department for a couple of years working under him on statewide wetland policies learning everything I could about how state programs ran. The opportunities we had to affect change in statewide and
national environmental policies were as rewarding as they were challenging. Then, I left to try my hand at being a local watershed coordinator for a Soil and Water Conservation District back in Ohio through an initiative supported by the newly-established Clean Ohio Fund.

After spending a couple of years coordinating local land use planning efforts, and supporting community engagement with water quality improvement projects, I finally set my eye on making an attempt at earning a doctorate degree. I then called upon all of my networking experience and bundled up my package of experiences in the form of theoretical coursework and applied accomplishments, and attempted to sell myself as a sure bet to several graduate programs around the nation. Much to my amazement and excitement, Oregon State University’s Environmental Science program was willing to take that bet. My pursuit of scholarship was about to broaden my horizons again, and take me on yet another adventure, to a place even further flung, and different than anything I had encountered in the Midwest. Stratovolcanoes, temperate rainforests, salmon runs, giant redwoods, high-desert juniper and sage, rim rock, open range, and basaltic tide pools. Where did the steel mill go?

While at Oregon State, I remained entrenched in the applied side of environmental studies. I worked my way through my PhD conducting field research on salmon habitats in coastal rivers and streams for the USEPA - Western Ecology Division; on integrated pest management in pear orchards for the USDA-Agricultural Research Service; and on forest management in the remote backcountry for the Bureau of Land Management. It was, however in the academic setting at Oregon State that the true value of my coursework in the ENS program came home to roost. As I designed my program of study with my graduate committee, they pushed over the quality of the content in the administration and policy courses I was able to take at UIS, and lamented their own inability offer courses of such depth. Oregon State’s program strength relied much more heavily on the natural sciences of natural resource management and assessment, not on policy development and implementation. Here, I had the chance to blend the strengths of these two programs into a unified philosophy of environmental science.

As I stomped about the forests and fields of the Pacific Northwest while also doing research on national wetland regulatory programs, I slowly began to understand more what it must have been like for a renaissance man like Charlie Schweighauser to dedicate so much of his time away from his home discipline of English to educate thousands of Sangamonians and Springfieldites about the wonders of the physical properties and laws that govern nature through evening star parties (my all-time favorite UIS public service events). Likewise, as I prepared for preliminary exams under faculty from such disparate backgrounds as oceanography, anthropology, sociology, political science, and statistics, I also began to appreciate more and more the fundamentally strong comparative analytical skills I learned from Robert McGregor’s course in World Environmental Attitudes (one of my favorite courses of all time). If the ENS program at UIS had been less applied, I may have lacked the ability to integrate the different disciplines I was working with at Oregon State, or they ability to build-up the multi-dimensional research agenda I have come to develop today.

Now that I'm on the other side of the college classroom developing scholars, I'm still very much the applied and interdisciplinary academic I was encouraged to be while in Springfield. You’re just as likely to find me working for the National Park Service in the summer somewhere, as you will be to find me teaching classes about Geology or Environmental Regulation in the fall or spring. As such, I find that I model myself in this role for my students after the ENS faculty who influenced me most while at UIS. In my present capacity as the coordinator for our program, I run three separate undergraduate research labs. In my Environmental Policy lab, I try to provide students the encouragement I received from Luther Skelton, to dig deeper into the organizational structure of public agencies get to the root of why some public policies are more effectively implemented by others. Though, if you ask them, they would probably say they wouldn’t have to learn nearly as much about dams as I insist - I still love re-reading Cadillac Desert. In my GIS research lab, I encourage students the way Bill Warren encouraged me to experiment with the tools, and to tackle big questions (and big data) by taking the time to systematically break down large data sources and complicated analytical processes into a series of manageable steps. In my Watershed Science lab, I use many of the same techniques and tools taught to me by David Jenkins (Biology) in his Biology of Water Pollution class. I just hope my enthusiasm for the subject is as infectious for my students in this subject, as his enthusiasm was for me.

Today, when upperclassmen sit down with me in my New York office for advice about pursuing graduate pro-
Ryan Taylor, continued

grams, and they express how they are lured by the gleaming facilities and international name recognition of major R-1 programs, I chuckle. I know how much those attributes held a similar allure for me to at that time in my life when my own horizons were broadening. Then in my sheepishly unsophisticated Appalachian drawl, I advise them carefully and cautiously, that the right program cannot be measured by those things. For them, the right program will be the one that meets them where they are, and whose faculty will invest the time and energy and resources available in their development as a scholar. It will be the one that shows them how scholarship can and should be more than just academic achievement. It will also have faculty who will inspire them to develop the skills necessary to learn and adapt to a changing landscape of knowledge and opportunity. Then I slide them a brochure about the ENS program at UIS and I tell them there are lots of different paths in life, and that you can’t always tell at the beginning which one will be full of more opportunity and adventure than others.

ALUMNI FOCUS: Nicole Johnson

Nicole is a ENS Department alumna who now works as the Director of Governmental Relations for the Conservancy of Southwest Florida in Naples, Florida.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

This is a question that for some is easy to answer, and I admire those who knew from an early age that they wanted to be a teacher, or a lawyer, or a fireman. Unfortunately, I was not one of those focused kids. In college I signed up for classes I thought looked interesting, without considering how those classes would translate into future employment.

By my third year at Carroll University, I had enough credits to complete a double major in geography and psychology. As a friend of the family quipped, “At least you’ll know where you are and why you’re there!” However, a career in either of these fields did not necessarily appeal to me. Fortunately, my parents urged me to continue from undergraduate immediately to graduate school.

Honestly, the first reason that I considered attending UIS was because it was close to home (Jacksonville) and my parents. But, I soon became excited to explore the opportunities available as part of the ENS program. The variety of classes available offered so many subjects that piqued my interest – World Environmental Religions, Pollution Prevention, and the list went on. I finally settled on a degree focus area in land use planning.

After graduation in 1997, I applied for jobs in a variety of professions and in locations all across the country. Later that year, I accepted a position at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, as the Public Affairs Specialist. Today, almost 18 years later, I am still at the Conservancy, as the Director of Governmental Relations, responsible for our growth management and land use planning program, including transportation planning and monitoring of legal agreements.

The Conservancy is a non-profit advocacy organization based in Naples, Florida. We were established in 1964 and our mission is to “Protect southwest Florida’s unique natural environment and quality of life...now and forever.” Our campus sits on 21 acres in the heart of Naples, and we have four core program areas – Environmental Education, Scientific Research, Wildlife Rehabilitation and Environmental Policy/Advocacy.

Florida is one of the fastest growing states, and as we emerge from the economic downturn, the state is adding 800 new people every day, many of whom are moving to Southwest Florida. While growth is not necessarily a bad thing, South Florida is one of the most ecologically diverse areas in the world, and home to America’s Everglades, the endangered Florida panther, cypress swamps and miles of beautiful beaches. We’re also home to bays and estuaries that continue to degrade due to pollution caused by excessive nutrient runoff. Toxic algae blooms are an all too common occurrence, and since the No Net Loss of Wetlands policy was instituted in the 90’s, the Naples area has lost over 21 square miles of wetlands.

Nicole releasing a red-shouldered hawk that had been rehabilitated at the Conservancy’s von Arx Wildlife Hospital.
Nicole Johnson, continued

Over the years, my role at the Conservancy has continued to evolve in reaction to both the political climate and the initiatives identified by the organization. First and foremost, our policy staff members are environmental advocates and lobbyists. Beyond that, thanks to the land use planning focus of my ENS degree, after graduation I had the necessary skillset to be hired by the Conservancy to do land use and policy planning. A major part of my job is to review the many development plans being proposed at the local level, determine consistency with local and state land use regulations, consider if the project was environmentally sustainable, educate our over 6,000 supporting families on the issues, lobby elected officials on the Conservancy’s behalf, and provide testimony at public hearings where the developments were being considered.

But, my job has always been so much more than that. One of my first projects was to engage the Marco Island community in support of protecting a sandbar system used for nesting, resting and feeding by protected shorebirds. As not everyone appreciated portions of the beach being roped off, I was responsible for engaging the public, responding to the critics, supporting the state wildlife agency, educating County Commissioners and, ultimately, protecting the birds! It was challenging, exciting and often stressful to navigate the verbal grenades being thrown my way. Yet these character-building experiences continue to create strong bonds with colleagues, the community and decision makers.

Since then, I have served on county and city committees, travelled to Tallahassee to speak before the Governor and Cabinet, made presentations to more organizations that I can name, and have been blessed to be promoted in my position at the Conservancy. But, probably the most special thing about working for the Conservancy is the remarkable group of people that I have the privilege to interact with on a daily basis. This includes our Environmental Policy team, colleagues both within and outside the organization and the amazing volunteers and donors that share so much of their time, talent and treasure.

So, how does this circle back to my time at UIS and my ENS degree? From my perspective, there are four key themes. First, the variety of options the ENS program offered allowed me to explore classes that I enjoyed, and through these classes I was able to better identify the focus area and career path that was best for me. Second, there were so many wonderful instructors, many of whom worked in the State of Illinois system, who could provide practical and experiential advice on employment options. Third, a degree in Environmental Studies with a land use planning focus gave me a distinct advantage when seeking employment in the non-profit environmental field. Many graduates have planning or environmental science degrees, but the combination of the two into one degree helped to set me apart from the competitions. Finally, UIS is ideally situated in the capital city, and that often allows graduates to find internships or full-time jobs in the State system.

Before graduation, I had the opportunity to work for a brief time at the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. I worked in the Bureau of Air on the Emission Reduction Market System, which in 1997 was a fairly new program for emissions trading. Such practical work experience was a wonderful opportunity to get out into the professional field and certainly was beneficial to my resume, which at the time was rather sparse.

I recall my time at UIS fondly, and I will always appreciate the skillset I received through my education there. I can say with absolute certainty that without my UIS masters’ degree, I would not be where I am today!
Dr. Mohammed Shahidullah

I am an adjunct faculty member and have taught Population and Public Policy since 2002. This is a multi-disciplinary that explains demographic phenomena. I also work as a State Demographer at the Center for Health Statistics, Illinois Department of Public Health, where I manage the Population Estimates and Demographic Services Program and represent the state with the U.S. Census Bureau.

My undergraduate degree was in statistics from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. I completed my master’s in demography from the Australian National University and received my PhD in sociology from Florida State. I received my MPH from UIS and completed a certificate in Master Online Teaching from UIUC.


Recently I completed a project on projecting Illinois populations. Currently I am coauthoring a book chapter on Prevalence of Childhood Lead Poisoning in Illinois and Chicago. Also I am working on two reports on estimating disability-free life expectancies. A Graduate Public Service Intern is working with me on these projects.

Dr. Anne-Marie Hanson

My research interests can be categorized broadly into the areas of political ecology; environmental justice and urban sustainability; tourism and sustainable development in conservation areas; gender and global environmental change; and garbage, recycling, and marine litter. While my past research is varied, all of my research projects include focus on 1) social inequalities linked to environmental problems; 2) the politics of scale associated with environmental issues (from the individual to the global); and 3) the human and non-human aspects of spatial and temporal change. My research methods include a variety of social science approaches, from oral histories to interviews and participant observation, to surveys, spatial analysis, and narrative policy analysis. I am starting a research project investigating the quality and effectiveness of online coursework in helping students gain practical skills for environmental careers, and to explore the use of online resources for digital storytelling.

Recent Publications

Bibliographical Information
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Recent Publications

Courses Taught
Global Political Ecology; Environmental Social Sciences & Humanities Intro to Environmental Science; Sustainable Development

Activities from the Last Year
In April, I attended the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in Chicago. My book was honored at the Geographical Perspectives on Women book event, my co-author and I hosted a panel with 14 international scholars on the topic of Women, Water, and Global Environmental Change, and I presented a paper on women’s activism in the Yucatán.

This summer I look forward to finishing up some past research, planning new research with Dr. Styles, and moving to a house in Rochester, IL. Other exciting events over the past year include the birth of my son Lucas and my husband Manuel receiving his U.S. Green Card. It has been a busy, interesting, and fulfilling first year at UIS and in Springfield.
Dr. Erinn Nicley

Biographical Information
I earned a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2012), a M.S. degree in Geography from Florida State University (2002), and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography and Spanish from the Ohio Wesleyan University (1995). Before returning to academia in 2006, I was a commissioned foreign service officer with the U.S. Department of State diplomatic corps. The honor of representing the US people abroad and at home provided me with rich experiences and grounded insights that I always try to integrate into my classroom as we study the connections of geography, international relations, and environmental politics.

Career Information
I currently am a full-time faculty member at Western Governors University, with the Social Sciences department. WGU is a non-profit, 100% online university. I work with a team of fellow faculty to mentor and educate students in a range of courses addressing geography, history, sociology, and more. My University of Illinois adjunct instructor position pre-dates my WGU appointment. However, I continue to work with the Department of Environmental Studies, because I truly respect the department's goal of ensuring that our graduates have a deeper comprehension of global political and economic conditions (i.e., geopolitics) within which to situate their environmental policy knowledge. Also, my undergraduate and graduate students continually inspire me with their creative passion that they bring to our geopolitics course.

Courses Taught at UIS
I have served the UIS Department of Environmental Studies since the Spring 2010 academic term, teaching the ENS 461 Geopolitics course to a combination of undergraduate and graduate students. The opportunity has provided excellent opportunities to adopt the latest online pedagogical approaches to active and blended learning as an ongoing effort to continually deliver the best academic content and educational experience I can.

Recent/Forthcoming Activities
The most rewarding professional activity I recently joined was the 2014 Lily Conference on Teaching and Pedagogy at Miami University in Oxford, OH. This four-day conference granted me a rich pool of creative pedagogical theories and practices currently being used by some of the leading educational theorists and fellow faculty from around the world. UIS was featured with a prominent keynote speaker, which was icing on the cake! In August 2015, I plan to attend the National Council on Geographic Education conference in Washington, D.C. to continue building my focus on online pedagogy that I can bring back to our online program.

What are some of your favorite research focuses?
My favorite research moment: hurtling down a rutted, muddy path in the open back of a pickup truck in the middle of a mountain coffee plantation in northern Nicaragua cloud forest while monsoonal rains pelt my face and the swollen river begins to surge over the bridge in front of us -- all this while researching post-conflict reconstruction in the 20+ years after the Nicaraguan civil war. More generally, I research post-conflict reconstruction, which examines the role of networked transnational and local institutions in shaping the nature of peace-building at the grassroots level. This geographic research brings together my interests in political geography, critical and feminist theories, ethnographic research methods, and an abiding interest in geographic places at the nexus of daily life. In the past, I conducted field research in two small Nicaraguan villages. Looking ahead, I am shifting my research focus towards the how these kinds of institutional networks shape political discourse in small U.S. towns so that I can continue to conduct fieldwork from my home region in Ohio.

What do you love most about your subject area?
I am a political geographer. Geography as a discipline is for me a perfect balance of social theory and tangible, real-world conditions. I can go into the world and truly experience it with all my senses, then come back to my office and merge that visceral experience with theoretical perspectives that help us understand and make ordered sense of that world. This is what drew me to political geography 24 years ago and I still love it today.

Teaching Philosophy
My teaching philosophy has always centered on three principles: 1) knowledge is inherently important; 2) critical thinking is essential; and 3) broader concepts must be connected to daily experience. In all my teaching/mentoring, I attempt to bring a passion to the topic and to build that same energy within the students. At the same time, I think students learn best when we don’t tell them what to think, but rather teach them to use a rational, evidence-based perspective to critically evaluate multiple perspectives and form their own tentative conclusions. My philosophy as an educator is to offer them intellectual frameworks to be able to make those more informed assessments of the world and to find their own passion about particular topics and issues that we must confront in the coming decades.
Graduate Student: Sagar Shah

Sagar received his BS and PGD in Environmental Sciences at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara, India in 2009 and 2010, respectively. For his undergrad thesis, he studied the how water pollution in the Vishwamitri river impacts the crocodile population in Vadodara, India. Before joining the UIS for his Masters in Environmental Sciences in 2011, Sagar worked with the Forest Department of Gujarat on various species specific projects (mainly large carnivorans, reptiles, and water fowl).

Sagar graduated this May 2015. At UIS while doing his masters, Sagar served as a Graduate Assistant for the Department of Environmental Studies. In summer of 2012, he worked with Dr. Tih-fen Ting on her ongoing project of state-threatened Franklin’s ground squirrel in Sangamon County, Il. In his masters’ thesis ‘Identifying potential dispersal corridors for Asiatic lions (Panthera leo persica) in the Greater Gir region of Gujarat, India’, he identified suitable habitat patches for Asiatic lions in densely populated and highly fragmented landscapes and delineated corridors connecting these patches.

Sagar is mainly interested in using GIS and remote sensing as tools to answer broad spatial and conservation ecology questions. His goal is to get into a doctoral program and earn a PhD in conservation ecology and ecosystem management.

Above: Asiatic lion (Panthera leo persica). Photo courtesy: Yogendra Shah

Graduate Student: Ryan Platte

Ryan Platte is a first year graduate student in the Environmental Studies department. He is pursuing an M.S. in Environmental Sciences, and his thesis will focus on estimating semi-aquatic mammal habitat use in the Emiquon wetland complex, including muskrat and otter. His study employs the use of field cameras which capture the mammals going about daily activities and providing clues to how they interact with one another in this restored wetland complex. Ryan will be finishing his degree and completing his thesis by May of 2016.

Ryan graduated from New Mexico State University in 2010 with a B.S. of Wildlife Management. After graduating from NMSU, he worked as a wildlife technician for state and federal agencies in New Mexico, Colorado, Idaho, Washington, and Wyoming. Most of Ryan’s research so far has focused on bighorn sheep and mule deer. After completing his M.S., Ryan would like to return to Wyoming and work as a wildlife biologist for the Wyoming Department of Game and Fish.
Environmental History in Elkhart, Illinois

Environmental History was brought to life for students in Dr. Megan Styles’ Environmental History Class. The class visited historic Old Gillett Farm on Elkhart Hill in Elkhart, Illinois, for a tour of the home, the grounds and the private chapel owned by the descendants of the Gillett family. Environmental Studies (ENS) graduate and former Environmental History student Whitney Pasquesi, whose family is descended from the Gilletts, arranged the tour for the ENS students. Dr. Styles’ Environmental History class participates in a “Place Project” each semester, in which students choose a local place of interest and research the environmental history of that place, culminating in a paper and presentation on their chosen location. Pasquesi’s topic for her place project was entitled “Elkhart Hill and the Gilletts: Changes in the Land and the Building of a ‘Cattle Empire’”. During the tour, ENS students got to see the places being discussed while learning about the environmental and family history, helping students to gain a sense of place and bringing history alive. The environmental history of central Illinois is shaped in many ways by the rich history surrounding Elkhart Hill and the Gillett family. What follows are excerpts from Pasquesi’s place project paper, along with topics covered on the historic tour.

Elkhart Hill in Elkhart, Illinois, has a long and varied history of land use, from the Native American tribes that lived there to the development of a thriving “Cattle Empire” developed by the Gillett family. Elkhart Hill is part of the Buffalo Hart Glacial Moraine, left behind by the retreat of glaciers. This moraine spans fifteen miles from Mt. Auburn to Elkhart, Illinois. At 777 feet, Elkhart Hill is the highest point in Logan County and spans over 600 acres. The timberland on the hill was the only timbered land between the Sangamon River and Salt Creek, making the land ideal for Native American villages. Artifacts have been found on Elkhart hill that indicate that the eastern slope of the hill was the site of an Illinois (Illini) Indian village prior to 1793. When the Kickapoo Indian tribes began to migrate into the area from the Great Lakes region, they established a village on Elkhart Hill and built their capital city ten miles to the north where Lincoln, Illinois now stands. The Kickapoo and neighboring Potawatomi tribes competed with the fur traders and others trying to settle the area, resulting in violence against the settlers. British fur operations funded the Indians’ attacks on French settlers in the area, leading to the war of 1812.

Elkhart Hill played a role in the war of 1812, serving as an East-West boundary line between the wilderness and the frontier. The boundary was patrolled by mounted troops because it served as a good vantage point due to its location on the North-South Indian Trail known as the Cahokia-Peoria Trail. This trail ran from the Great Lakes region in northern Minnesota down to Kentucky, and passed over Elkhart hill. In response to growing hostilities between the Kickapoo tribe and the settlers, Governor Ninian Edwards organized and led a march against the Indians along a 100-mile long trail that came to be known as “Edwards Trace”. Elkhart Hill is the only place that remnants of this trail can still be seen today. Following the war, the U.S. negotiated over 200 treaties with the Indian nations, resulting in the tribes ceding their lands and moving onto reservations west of the Mississippi River. In 1819, the Kickapoo signed a treaty with the U.S. government, ceding over 10 million acres of land for $2,000 in silver annually for 15 years. By 1836, all the Kickapoo were gone from Illinois.

In 1819, the first settlement was constructed on the north-eastern slope of Elkhart Hill. James Latham and his son Richard built a cabin and barns using timber from the woodland and accessed water for growing sustenance crops from natural springs found on the hill. Many early settlers moving west passed by these prairie lands be-
cause they didn’t know how to cultivate the unfamiliar prairies, leaving the land around Elkhart mostly unsettled. John Shockey leased the land from the Lathams in 1853, laying out the village of Elkhart in 1855, and leading to the incorporation of the town of Elkhart in 1861.

With many of the settlers passing through to settle further west, the area of Central Illinois was opened up to land speculators, who came to Illinois in large numbers from 1835-1837. Using the Land Warrant system set up by the U.S. Government following the war of 1812, land speculators from the East Coast acquired great tracts of land in Illinois. John Dean Gillett, from whom the current owners of Elkhart Hill are descended, was among these land speculators. Gillett’s stepfather and uncle were partners in the land investment firm Smith & Tuttle. In 1835, they sent John D. Gillett to Illinois as their land agent, to buy large tracts of prairie land around central Illinois. John Gillett speculated that with the fertile soils and natural springs around Elkhart Hill, and with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 opening the Great Lakes region to trade, that the Midwest would soon grow in commercial and agricultural interest. John Gillett’s role was acquiring lands for his investors and selling them to settlers as the values increased. John Gillett also worked as a farm laborer and used his wages to invest in his own land surrounding Elkhart Hill. He acquired over 16,500 acres by 1868. On his newly acquired land, Gillett built a home and farm, and began to raise and fatten hogs for market.

The settlement of Elkhart Hill and surrounding areas had many environmental impacts on the land; including dredging ditches for irrigation, harvesting of timber to build homes and barns and to supply fuel, and plowing of prairies in order to create cropland and pastureland. However, the settlement of the land also allowed John Gillett to begin developing his “Cattle Empire”. Gillett raised hogs and shipped them down the Sangamon River to markets in Alton, Illinois and other river towns. With the profits from these hog sales, Gillett acquired more land and expanded production into corn and wheat. Upon the completion of the Chicago-Alton Railroad (C&A), and the due to the rapid expansion of settlement in the Central Illinois Region, the markets for agricultural products expanded. Gillett used this opportunity to import Durham Cattle from Scotland, and cross them with the more durable American Stock, to develop the Shorthorn breed of cattle popular today. As demand and markets for cattle and agriculture increased, Gillett expanded his operation, ushering in the era of large-scale farming operations in the Midwest. Gillett’s 9,000-acre farm in Logan County, Illinois was among the great agricultural operations owned by the “Cattle Kings” of the prairie regions of Indiana and Illinois. Gillett shipped over 2,000 head of cattle and 1,000 head of hogs to Chicago and Europe annually. By 1855, Elkhart Illinois was one of the largest shipping points on the C&A Railroad, due to Gillett’s cattle empire. Gillett and his grandson Hiram Keays won numerous awards for their “fat stock” cattle at the Chicago stockyards livestock shows, and their prime quality beef was in high demand in the markets in Europe. The London Gazette dubbed Gillett “The Cattle King of the World.”

The Chicago Stockyards played a large role in the history of Illinois, and in the development of agriculture throughout the nation. Gillett’s cattle operation was closely tied to the expansion of the Chicago Union Stockyards, and Gillett was one of the most influential fat stockmen of the day. The steer featured in a carving on the Union Stockyard gates was Gillett’s prize steer, named John Sherman after the founder of the Union Stockyards. Gillett was commemorated as a member of Chicago’s prestigious Saddle and Sirloin Club, an organization honoring leaders in the American Livestock Industry. Other influential members included well-known Illinois names...
Environmental History in Elkhart, Illinois, continued

such as; Samuel Allerton, J. Ogden Armor, John Bunn and the Swift family. These men were the foundation of the U.S. meatpacking industry, and helped the industry to expand while maximizing production and profit.

John D. Gillett and his descendants continued to expand their agricultural operations in Elkhart, Illinois for many generations. This resulted in additional land holdings and tenant farms, which grew corn, soybeans and continued livestock production. The cattle operations continue to this day on Old Gillett Farm, but they have changed extensively, as has the land, since the days of Gillett’s Cattle Empire. Over the generations, the land was divided up into smaller parcels and farms to be disturbed to various descendants. Throughout the 1900’s and into the 1970’s, Old Gillett Farm continued grain production and some livestock production, with Elizabeth Keays Drake, the great-great granddaughter of John D. Gillett, managing the farm. With the mechanization of agricultural practices, fields of crops expanded in size, and with changing

demands, the production shifted from livestock to commercial production of corn and soybeans. About 40-80 head of Angus cattle are now raised on Old Gillett Farm, but the primary production of the farm and the surrounding land is corn and soybean crops cultivated by tenant farmers. Today, corn and soybeans are cultivated on 1200 acres (about 600 acres corn and 600 soybeans, rotating annually). Over the years, Gillett’s estate on Elkhart Hill has been home to many descendants, with various businesses surrounding the farm; including; a small household goods business called the Country Bumpkin, operated during the 1960’s and 1970’s in various historic homes restored by Elizabeth Keays Drake; a successful Arabian Horse Breeding operation (1970’s-200’s), and a historic bed and breakfast that offered weddings and historic tours (1990’s-2013). Today, about 250 acres remain as pastureland, and over 700 acres are in conservation. (Including about 128 acres of virgin timber woodland, and 40 acres of restored prairie and wetland). The present generation is working to restore some of the native habitats that were altered by agricultural production, and they still live on the original estate began by John D. Gillett on Old Gillett Farm.

The land on Elkhart Hill has endured through the times of the Native American tribes who once occupied its fertile slopes, through the acquisition of prairie lands by land speculators and the resulting settlement and agricultural production on the land for cattle and hog production. The rise of foreign and domestic markets for agricultural products brought in the great cattle empires and the expansion of the Chicago Stockyards. John D. Gillett’s sound business sense and love of the land helped to shape a legacy that has lasted for generations and is an influential piece of Illinois history. Environmental history in Illinois is so greatly tied to agriculture, and the students who visited Old Gillett Farm had an opportunity to witness a piece of Illinois history first hand. There are many challenges facing the current descendants, including an expanding coal ash refuse site from Viper Mine that threatens the water quality and the health of prairie and wetland restorations adjacent to the mine operations, issues from land subsidence due to longwall mining under the agricultural fields, and challenges of working and maintaining the land as the descendants age and sources of income for the farm change over time. It is the hope of the current generation that the love and respect that John D. Gillett had for the prairie and the unique land surrounding Elkhart Hill will be shared by those who help to shape the future of Elkhart Hill.
2014-2015 Graduating Students

**BA**
- Aguirre, Rainer Wayne
- Berghschnieder, Alec *
- Clotfelter, Brandy
- Lindholm, Sarah
- Souther, David
- Volner, R Samuel

**MA**
- Baker, Carolyn #
- Barrow, Mallory #
- Bullock, Rebeckah #
- Coad, Samantha

- Daniels, Simon #
- DeBatista, Jacquelyn * #
- Dingle, Justin
- Folmer, Frances
- Guillermo, Leanna #
- Hinton, Douglas #
- Jarvis, Kiersten #
- Johnson, Benjamin #
- Lowgren, Laura
- Rivas, Adena #
- Russell, Jennifer
- Schumacher, Leanne #
- Stock, Crystal

- Stull, Trisha #
- Warmbein, Barrett
- Wassenhove, Samantha

* - Program Marshals; # - Department Honors
Programs select one graduating student in each program who best exemplifies the goals and spirit of the program. That Program Marshal is issued a gold stole for the commencement ceremony. Department Honors are based on GPA.

Student Presentations at Professional Conferences

**UIS Student Technology, Arts and Research Symposium**
- Melissa Breyer
- Mona Colburn
- Kaitlin Hollenbeck
- April Simnor (two presentations)
- Kelsey Townsend

**Illinois State Academy of Science**
- Melissa Breyer
- Kaitlin Hollenbeck
- Jennifer Pendleton (Outstanding Zoology Oral Presentation by a Graduate Student)
- April Simnor
- Kelsey Townsend

**Illinois Chapter of The Wildlife Society**
- Melissa Breyer
- Amanda Clayton
- Jennifer Pendleton
- April Simnor

Student Awards

- Simon Daniels
  - Outstanding Student in GIS—Honorable Mention
- Jackie DeBatista
  - Outstanding Graduate Capstone Student (Other Public Sector)
- Leanna Guillermo
  - Outstanding Graduate Capstone Student (Private Sector)
- Kaitlin Hollenbeck
  - Central Illinois Typographical Union Local #177 Scholarship
  - Illinois Lake Management Association Research Scholarship
  - Outstanding Graduate Public Service Internship Award

- Malik Nailing
  - Martha Schiebel Harrison Scholarship
  - Adena Rivas
  - Outstanding Graduate Capstone Student (Non-profit NGO)
  - Joanna Rohlf
  - Outstanding Student in GIS
  - Heather Schroeder
  - Friends of UIS Scholarship
  - Louise Hartman Schewe Scholarship
  - Thomas A. Shearer Scholarship
  - Sagar Shah
  - Outstanding Masters Thesis
  - April Simnor

- Luther Skelton Award (Spring)
- Crystal Stock
  - Outstanding Student in GIS—Honorable Mention
  - Outstanding Graduate Capstone Student (IEPA)

- Trisha Stull
  - Environmental Studies Alumni Scholarship
  - Outstanding Undergraduate Capstone Video
  - Kelsey Townsend

- Luther W. Skelton Award (Fall)
- Outstanding Graduate Public Service Internship—Nominee
Commencement 2015

Above: MS students from Dr. Tih-Fen Ting’s lab group.

Left: Rainier Aguirre (BA) poses with Chancellor Susan Koch.

Below: Hanging out at the brunch for graduating online students.
ENS is making memories. We are sure our alumni also have memories from their time at UIS/SSU. Please share! Alumni, tell us your stories and forward us photos. We would like to share alumni stories in future newsletters!

Are you trying to fill an internship or employment position? We can provide qualified applicants.

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