

Information for Prospective Community GIS Partners: Philosophies, Options, & Commitments

I believe students learn best by collaborating with community partners who are themselves working on important social, economic, and environmental challenges. These partnerships produce knowledge that is relevant and important for society and build lasting relationships with unexpected benefits for communities and for students. My students and I work with community-based mapping and spatial analysis projects in several different ways.

Simple mapping projects: For relatively simple mapping-only projects, students in my Fall Quarter cartography/GIS course (Geog 360) can usually help out. Each one does an independent project at the end of the term, and I try to offer at least a few community-based projects with non profit groups. They are beginners with using GIS software and they work on the final project for only about 3 weeks, so they cannot manage a great deal of data acquisition and preparation, or advanced analysis. But if your group needs some straightforward maps of publicly-available data, or you have your own data in hand and need maps, these students are prepared to make all kinds of maps. Simple web-mapping applications are also possible, using online tools like Google Maps. The students start work on the projects in mid-November, so I finalize project descriptions with community partners in October. Project results are delivered in the first week in December.

Simple GIS projects: For fairly simple mapping and analysis projects using GIS, student in my Winter Quarter urban GIS course (Geog 461) can help. They do small group projects at the second half of the quarter (roughly mid-Feb to mid-March). These are intermediate students (all have had Geog 360 or an equivalent, so they can handle more complicated applications, and locate and work with publicly-available data (or data from your group, if need be).

Complicated GIS projects: For projects that require a lot of new data collection/preparation and spatial analysis (in addition to map production), students in our Spring Quarter GIS Workshop course (Geog 469) are a good bet. Teams of 3-4 work on a single GIS application for all of spring quarter, so we can tackle more ambitious projects. I work with community partners in February or March to frame project needs and goals, and spring quarter starts at the end of March. Project partners meet with the students a couple of times during the quarter to provide advice and feedback, and final results are available in the first week of June.

Projects with unusual time lines: Community needs rarely match university time schedules, so we have options for supporting projects at other times of the year. Individual students can register for Internship or Independent Study credits that count toward their graduation requirements and then work directly with your group on a GIS or mapping project. Your group supervises the actual work the student does, and I serve as the faculty of record and give the final grade (with your input!).

What do I need from you?

- A key contact person or group of people who will oversee the project
- A short project description of project goals, data sources (if you know them in advance), and any information about your organization that will help guide the students.
- Timely and thoughtful communication with students. It is important that the students be able to get guidance from you at the outset and feedback on questions or preliminary outputs as they are working on your project. On 10-week quarters, they are under a great deal of time pressure to complete intermediate tasks toward finishing the project. But, I also understand that you too are under time pressure! I do ask the students to be cognizant of your busy professional lives, and have them designate one person to coordinate communications with the community partner.
- Finalized dates for any student-community meetings. Within reason, the students are able to attend in-community meetings to talk about the project. But we must have those dates in place **before** the start of the course, so that the students can plan ahead.
- Attendance at occasional student-community work sessions (Geog 469 only). Geography 469 typically incorporates 2 in-person work sessions with student teams and their community partners – one to kick off the project and an Open House where the students present & discuss their project results with you. We typically ask them to make one mid-project report to their partners, but leave it up to students and partners to determine whether a formal meeting is needed then. For partners not located in the Seattle area, I'm happy to talk more about how we can collaborate with long distance.

What are the tangible outputs?

Of course these vary a little, depending on the specific project. But in general, outputs generally involve a summary report of the project, as well as all maps and data created. We emphasize the accessibility of these outputs to community partners with a broad range of computer and GIS skills. So you can expect to receive project data files and map files in formats that can be used in a GIS software, digital images of all maps produced (typically as .jpps or .tifs), and a hard copies of all the maps. For cost reasons, we are limited in the number of hard copy color maps we can provide to partners, so if your project involves producing a larger number of color maps, we may not be able to provide hard copies of all maps.

Data access / confidentiality concerns

We strive to create an atmosphere of openness, discussion, and sharing with respect to data access, concerns about privacy and confidentiality of information, and projects that may be sensitive or controversial. Of course, any non-public data you share with us for the project remains yours, and will not be used for any future work without your permission. Participating students learn about issues of copyright and confidentiality in my courses, and are expected to adhere to any guidelines or restrictions about data usage. Please let me know as soon as possible if you have special concerns about these issues related to your project idea, whether before the project, during, or after. It is important that student teams know in advance about potential conflicts or disagreements with respect to data access, mapping, and project goals, so that they do not unintentionally worsen a complicated situation.