



*Appalachian State University*

# DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY & PLANNING SEMI-ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

*Winter '24*

## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR, *Dr. Saskia van de Gevel*



As we reflect on the past year, we are reminded of the resilience and strength of our Boone, NC, community in the face of unexpected challenges. The devastation caused by Hurricane Helene had a profound impact on our region and university, with our department feeling its effects particularly deeply. The storm caused significant damage to our building, Rankin Science West (RSW), forcing the displacement of our faculty members and leaving our classrooms and research spaces temporarily unusable. Navigating the logistical complexities of alternative classroom arrangements and faculty offices became a significant part of our focus, all while we continued our search for two new tenure-track Assistant Professor faculty members to strengthen our team.

Despite these hurdles, our department has remained committed to supporting our students through these difficult times. We are incredibly grateful to our alumni, colleagues, and

supporters from across the country—particularly from Geography and Planning departments—who have offered both food pantry donations and emotional support to students.

As we look forward, we ask for your continued support this holiday season. Your donation to the Department of Geography and Planning Fund will directly support events that foster connection and belonging, such as graduation receptions and social activities for new students. These initiatives are more than just gatherings—they are lifelines, providing our students with the emotional and social support they need to succeed. In these challenging times, your generosity ensures that even in the face of adversity, our students can feel the strength of a supportive community and the lasting bond of an alum network.

Thank you for helping us rebuild, reconnect, and continue to support the next generation of geographers and planners. Your contribution makes all the difference.

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# APP STATE AT Sedaag

**NOV. 23-25  
GREENVILLE, SC**

Multiple faculty and students were in attendance and presented research at the Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers (SEDAAG) meeting in Greenville, SC, hosted by Furman University. Graduate student Gloria Hope (top) presented a poster, "Geopolitics of Exclusive Bordering in the United States: a Case Study of Colombia and Venezuela", pertaining to her thesis work. Dr. Derek Martin (middle) gave a presentation highlighting novel methodology for monitoring large wood transport in coastal plain rivers. The method utilizes RFID tags and a reader to geolocate tagged pieces of wood through time. Dr. Rob Brown (bottom) gave presented an engaging history on the role of Reconstruction Era struggles in the origin of Black Masking Indians in New Orleans. Rob utilized historical art etchings and paintings to make his case. Former graduate student and now Ph.D. student at UNC-Chapel Hill, Sarah Ulrich, presented her poster titled "Mental Health Disparities among Maternal Populations Following Heatwave Exposure in North Carolina" which was also entered into the graduate poster competition. The department looks forward to attending SEDAAG in Lexington, KY in 2025!



## DR. BAKER PERRY ACCEPTS POSITION AT UNLV, BECOMES NEVADA STATE CLIMATOLOGIST

Over the summer, Dr. Baker Perry accepted a position in the Department of Geography at the University of Nevada, Reno, as Professor of Climatology and Nevada State Climatologist. The department hosted a gathering to celebrate his time and achievements here at App State. In a message to colleagues, Perry said, "I have spent my entire professional career of nearly three decades at App State, and it is through my relationships with you and many others here that I have had the opportunity to develop my career of research, teaching, and field experiences across the world. I am deeply grateful for all my meaningful collaborations and friendships with each of you." While we miss seeing Baker in the halls of RSW, we couldn't be more thrilled for this opportunity and next steps in his career. While Baker may be enjoying the higher altitudes in the Sierra Nevada's, he maintains a connection to the High Country. Baker will continue his affiliation with the Research Institute for Environment, Energy and Economics (RIEEE) as a Senior Research Associate.

Photos: (top) Baker's colleague, Tom Matthews, Saskia van de Gevel, Baker Perry. (bottom) Baker and Tom with current students Quinn Keefer and Eli Aquino

# FACULTY Spotlights

## DR. MAGGIE SUGG AWARDED \$1.5 MILLION TO STUDY CLIMATE DISTASTERS AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



Over the next three years, Sugg will receive \$1 million from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's Gulf Research Program to lead a project titled "Assessing Mental Health Disparities in At-Risk Youth After Climate Disasters in Louisiana, USA." This study will identify the mental health impacts of climate disasters on youth in Louisiana's Gulf Coast, focusing on marginalized communities facing heightened risks due to social inequities and recurring environmental hazards. In collaboration with researchers from North Carolina State University, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and VIA LINK, Sugg plans to utilize digital crisis platforms to assess if youth mental health is affected by key events such as hurricanes, heatwaves and the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding will also support the hiring of a full-time Climate Health Fellow.

Additionally, the National Science Foundation will award Sugg over \$525,000 to lead a project titled "Mental Health Implications of Compounding Climate Events on Youth Populations." The three-year study will investigate the mental health impacts of compounding climate events (CCEs) — such as hurricanes and heatwaves — on youth populations across the United States, addressing a critical knowledge gap as these events are expected to become more frequent and intense. This study, led by an interdisciplinary team of geographers, epidemiologists, psychologists, environmental economists and climate scientists, will analyze the direct and indirect mental health effects of CCEs throughout the United States.

## DR. MARK SPOND AND UNIVERSITY TEAM MOVE TOWARD NEXT STEPS IN FUNDING FOR THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE'S 21ST CENTURY CONSERVATION SERVICE CORPS & CIVILIAN CLIMATE CORPS PROGRAM

Dr. Spond and a university-wide team recently had their grant proposal, Appalachian State Conservation Corps, selected by the National Park Service to move forward with negotiations of a master cooperative agreement. If successful, the grant would give students opportunities to engage and collaborate in climate resilience and conservation work through the federal programs of The National Park Service's 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21 CSC) and the American Climate Corps (ACC). The timing of the news of their application couldn't be more relevant in the wake of Helene. Dr. Spond also took time to pivot his special topics course, Natural Resources Along the Blue Ridge Parkway, to conduct some clean up work in and around App State's Nature Preserve (pictured right).



# FACULTY & STUDENT Achievements

## Appalachian State College of Arts & Sciences

**Dr. Song Shu** | Outstanding Junior Faculty Award Winner

**Dr. Saskia van de Gevel** | Student Success Award Nominee, Outstanding Advisor Nominee, and Distinguished Leader Award Nominee

**Dr. Elizabeth Shay** | Outstanding Advisor Nominee

**Dr. Johnathan Sugg** | Teacher of the Year Award Nominee

## Other Faculty Awards and Grants

**Dr. Maggie Sugg** | SAFE Grant (Travel to COP29) | NSF and NASEM grants (see previous page)

## Student Grants & Awards

**Miranda Darwin** | Marvin Collins Award | North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association

## Student Publications

A total of 14 peer-reviewed articles with students as the primary author or co-author (current and recent grads) were accepted for publication. See a select list here. Congrats to grad student Chris Lucero and recent graduate Erali Miller on their first primary author publications!

## DR. VAN DE GEVEL NOMINATED FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS' DISTINGUISHED LEADER AWARD

A staff member emphasized the positive changes implemented by van de Gevel, writing, "Saskia was appointed department chair in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and used the remote learning period as an opportunity to implement substantial improvements. To address space shortages, she led the charge to convert the department's unused map library to an Active Learning Classroom. She established a food and toiletry pantry, often using her own money to restock the rapidly-depleting items during the pandemic. Saskia also updated the curriculum, removing courses that hadn't been offered in years and creating courses on emerging topics in geospatial technology and planning."



**Dr. Song Shu** | Receiving the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award

**DON'T WANT TO WAIT FOR  
THE NEXT NEWSLETTER?  
STAY CURRENT WITH  
FACULTY AND STUDENT  
PUBLICATIONS HERE!**

A faculty member wrote, "Since assuming the post in 2020, Dr. van de Gevel has capably performed the many routine duties of a chair (e.g., hiring and reviewing personnel, developing and maintaining curriculum, managing and improving facilities and services) while also nurturing our department with an ambitious but realistic vision for meeting the complex needs of students and adapting to the changing demands of our profession. As a recruiter, Dr. van de Gevel articulates the value of our degrees across campus and beyond—to students' families, alumni, donors, community members, prospective faculty and other institutions. Dr. van de Gevel is a welcoming presence, eager to ensure everyone who joins the department feels that they belong."

# ALUMNI Spotlight

**GREG DOBSON**, M.A. '06  
DIRECTOR OF GIS AND ENGAGEMENT  
UNC-A NEMAC



Greg Dobson has spent the last 18 years working at UNC Asheville's National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center (NEMAC), where he currently serves as Director of GIS and Engagement. When he first got to NEMAC in 2006, the Center had no GIS capacity, or even GIS software. Since then, he has helped it grow to become well-known for their GIS research, application, and development work in the environmental, climate, and community resilience sectors. He now manages a team of three GIS professionals, while also collaborating closely with NEMAC programmers and software developers, to work on a variety of local-, regional-, and national- scale projects. In 2016 his GIS team was awarded the Special Achievement Award in GIS by Esri. Greg has also been a part of conference planning committees for the North Carolina ArcGIS Users Group and the North Carolina GIS Conference. He is currently serving as the University of North Carolina system representative to the Statewide Mapping Advisory Committee. His time at AppState was critical for learning how to apply GIS and GIScience in ways that can lead to a better understanding of our changing and dynamic world. Under the direction of Dr. Jeff Colby, he learned how to use GIS to better analyze local hydrology, floodplains, and broader watershed characteristics. Many others in the department also had a great impact on his professional and personal life. Greg is very proud to be an alumnus of the Geography Department at AppState, and is constantly reminded of how well-known the GIS focus within the department is (dating back to the early 1980s) as he attends conferences and meetings across the state and nationally. Click below for a GIS tutorial with an atmospheric science focus. Developed by Greg and NOAA scientists.

The screenshot shows the NCAR Geographic Information Systems Program website. The main heading is "GIS Tutorial for Atmospheric Sciences - Section 1.1: Basic GIS Fundamentals". Below the heading, there is a paragraph describing the course: "This is a freely available Geographic Information Systems (GIS) course geared towards GIS and weather and climate students and practitioners. This course is intended to teach basic Geographic Information Systems (GIS) concepts, methods and terminology using weather and climate case studies." The page lists "Section 1 - Basic GIS Fundamentals" and "Exercise 1 - Introduction to GIS". Under "Technical skills you will learn:", there is a bulleted list: "Open and explore the software interface.", "Add data to the map.", and "Work with attribute data." On the right side, there is a "RELATED TUTORIALS" section with links to "Section 1.1: Basic GIS Fundamentals", "Section 1.2: Exploring Spatial Data", "Section 1.3: Data Symbology and Classification", "Section 1.4: Cartographic Mapping", and "Section 1.5: Coordinate Systems and Map Projections". At the bottom right, there is a "HELP DESK" section with the text: "If you have any questions or comments please email us at [gisSupport@ucar.edu](mailto:gisSupport@ucar.edu)".

**WANT TO LEARN MORE  
ABOUT OUR ALUMNI?**

**CLICK HERE FOR OUR  
ALUMNI WEB MAP!**

# annual holiday brunch BAKE-OFF!

The department hosted its *Annual Holiday Brunch Bake Off* on reading day this year. We need more savory dishes folks! Instead of awarding a sweet and savory award this year, we awarded prizes to the top two sweet treats!

First Place

## Sweet

Caroline Fehlman  
*Cranberry Pound Cake*

Second Place

## Sweet

Kathleen Schroeder  
*Rum Cake*



# GEOGRAPHY STRONG!

## SUPPORT FROM GEOGRAPHY PROGRAMS ACROSS THE COUNTRY IN THE WAKE OF HURRICANE HELENE



Following Helene, our department received an outpouring of support from various individuals and multiple departments in the geography, planning, and geosciences realm. During these challenges, we primarily focus on supporting our students and it has been rewarding and heart-warming seeing that support extend beyond the halls of Rankin Science West. We would like to acknowledge the following individuals and programs (in no order) for their contributions to our food pantry and their words of support and encouragement to our geography and planning majors.

- Dr. Stuart McFeeters | CSU Fresno
- Dr. Irene Naesse | Orange Coast College
- Dr. Vickie Jensen | California State University Northridge
- Dr. Conghe Song | Department of Geography and Environment | UNC - Chapel Hill
- Prof. Meghan Cope | Department of Geography and Geosciences | University of Vermont
- Dr. Susie Ziegler | Department of Earth, Environmental and Geographical Sciences | Northern Michigan University
- Ron Kalafsky and Nicholas Nagle | University of Tennessee at Knoxville
- Carol Crutchfield Carter | App State Department Alum
- Jody Smothers-Marcello
- Todd Burch

Thank you again for your kindness and support during this time. It is truly appreciated as we work to restore normalcy in our department and continue our teaching and research mission. Our food pantry is well-stocked going into the Spring semester. The students will be greeted with your thoughtful cards upon their return!



*Letters of support and encouragement!*

# STUDENT Spotlights

AN UPDATE FROM A RECENT  
INTERNSHIP HIGHLIGHT AND  
RECENT GRADUATE, LYDIA!

**LYDIA NOWAK, BS '24**  
Engineering Technologist  
Pike Engineering



“ I have been applying for jobs since the beginning of the semester on various platforms, and been in touch with multiple people to help me with my search. Dr. van de Gevel being one of them, as well as previous employers and mentors from my internship (Stokes County) or scholarship donors (Carol Crutchfield). A couple weeks ago I heard back from a position I applied for at Pike Engineering. I did an online interview with them, followed by an in-person interview in Winston-Salem. They all went very smoothly and I felt comfortable answering the questions and discussing the role I would have at the company. This last Friday I was called by the manager and offered a position as a Power Engineering Technologist, and I accepted the position yesterday. I will start there at the beginning of June after graduation. I hope to work my way up and eventually transfer to a GIS-related position as the company grows.

Thank you for the support through my time at App State! ”



## DESPITE HELENE HURDLES, GEOGRAPHY AND PLANNING CLUB IS REVAMPED AND ENGAGING STUDENTS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Following Helene, the club enlisted Dr. van de Gevel and Dr. Martin for field lessons in dendrology and hydrology. Via an instagram post, club president, Madelynn Spencer said “geography club members and friends learned about the history and importance of dendrology, and got hands on practice with tree coring. The group also practiced surveying techniques on the banks of Boone Creek and learned about the practical application of surveying, as well as careers in the field.” A week later, the club hosted a “Pizza & Chat” to discuss Helene and disaster relief and preparedness. The club also partnered with the Office of Community-Engaged Leadership on November 16th to help with Helene recovery efforts in the Boone. At the end of semester meeting the club discussed big plans for next semester and beyond, including volunteer work, hiking, caving, drones, slope days, and habitat for humanity. You can show your support, while staying current with future events, by following the club on instagram, [@appstateghyclub](https://www.instagram.com/appstateghyclub)



Photos: (top) Madelynn Spencer coring a pine tree on campus. (bottom) Final meeting of the semester, pizza not pictured!



## DR. JEFF COLBY RETIREMENT CELEBRATION

The department celebrated Jeff's Colby's career in conjunction with our annual bake-off. Why celebrate with one cake when you can celebrate with a dozen, right?! Former graduate student, Greg Dobson, gave a memorable speech in which he lauded Jeff Colby and the department's geospatial curriculum as being pivotal in his development as a GIS professional. Jeff has undoubtedly used his knowledge of GIS for water resources to help the GIS curriculum and students from App State be recognized and desired by future employers.

We want to offer our congratulations and gratitude as we announce the retirement of an esteemed GIS faculty member: Dr. Jeff Colby. They have devoted decades of service to our department and the field of physical geography. Although Jeff will be bidding farewell to his role as educator, mentor, and researcher, he will be missed and their impact will continue to resonate for years.

*Pictures: (top) Greg Dobson, Jeff Colby, Kathleen Schroeder, Saskia van de Gevel, Neil Lineback, and Mike Mayfield. (bottom) Jeff Colby receives plaque from the department as Greg Dobson toasts his achievements and impact.*



## ARE YOU INTERESTED IN HELPING OUR STUDENTS?

### Ways you can help:

- Share internship opportunities
- Share job openings
- Donate to our food pantry
- Contribute to scholarships




SCAN OR CLICK QR CODE TO  
DONATE DIRECTLY TO  
THE DEPARTMENT!

Follow us on social media to stay up to date throughout the year!

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 @appalachianstategeography7364

*This issue's title page banner:*

### This could be you! Call for Web Maps for our Title Page Banner!

For the past two issues of this newsletter, we have highlight a couple of web maps from our faculty here. One mapping dam removals and their peer-reviewed studies and the other looking at climate change beliefs across the United States. We also want to extend this highlight in the newsletter to our alumni! If you are interested in your project being highlighted on our title page, please email our GIS Lab Supervisor, Josh Platt, at [plattjr@appstate.edu](mailto:plattjr@appstate.edu). We are very interested in what you all are working on!