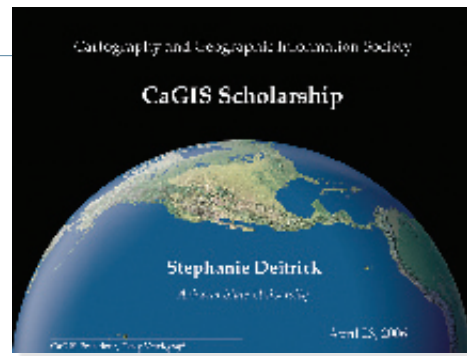


Young, talented, and ready to make a difference

CaGIS scholarship recipient shares her experience on how she got involved in the geography profession



Each year, member organizations of the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping collectively offer over 20 awards in support of education and communication in the field of surveying and mapping. In 2006, the \$1000 scholarship offered by Cartography and Geographic Information Science was awarded to Stephanie Deitrick, a Ph.D. student at Arizona State University. The ACSM Bulletin asked Stephanie to tell our audience about herself and how she came to study geography.

Stephanie started her Ph.D. work this summer; her research will focus on uncertainty visualization and decision making. The milestones that led her to this research include an undergraduate degree in mathematics from Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California and a Masters in Geography from Arizona State University. Armed with a strong background in math and geography, she is pursuing geography as her major field of specialization. This in itself is not surprising—geography has always been a fascinating element of human exploration and learning—but the path that took her to a career in geography was unexpected.

“In order to support myself while in school,” Stephanie explains, “I took an administrative position at a transportation engineering firm, which allowed me some flexibility to attend courses. After I started that position, the owner suggested I take a GIS class, as this might be useful for the company—he had previously expressed interest that I work on projects, rather than administrative, and GIS was clearly something he wanted to add to his company’s list of expertise.

Up to that point, I had never heard of GIS in my education, and I had never taken any geography classes, but I decided to look into the possibility of taking a course or two at ASU. I eventually ended up in a cartography class with Rob Edsall—which changed all my carefully laid out plans. As much as I had enjoyed working towards my math degree, I loved the Cartography class. Rob encouraged my interest and referred me to the ACSM/CaGIS web site. He also showed me some journal articles and encouraged me to get involved with some of the student competitions. Soon after this class, I was officially a Geography student.”

Stephanie joined ACSM/CaGIS in 2004 as a student member, and she attended the 2005 ACSM annual conference and AutoCarto in Las Vegas as a student volunteer. “It was my first professional conference,” Stephanie remarks, “and I was a little

overwhelmed by all the people, talks, and workshops. I really think it helped to be a student volunteer, as I had many opportunities to interact with the speakers and other attendees, as well as other students. For students new to the organization, I think that this is a really helpful way to start getting involved.”

Stephanie continues to be involved professionally, thanks partially to the CaGIS scholarship she received, which will be used for traveling to conferences during the 2006-2007 school year. There are several conferences where she plans to present or attend, including the Spatial Data Handling Conference in Vienna, Austria, NACIS 2006 in Madison, Wisconsin, and AAG in San Francisco, California. She’s not able to attend AutoCarto this year, but she is looking forward to the call for papers for 2007 and hoping that one of the research topics she has been pursuing will be on the agenda.

When I first called Stephanie to find out when she would be free to “chat” about her career, she was on her way to a meeting. We exchanged a few words, and in that limited time, I could not but admire her exuberance. There are four major projects that Stephanie has going at the moment. She is working on an atlas of economic and social change in the Phoenix Metropolitan area; she is involved in mapping fuel deposits in Yellowstone using remotely sensed data; she has used the results of her thesis research on the effect of uncertainty visualization on decision-making to prepare a paper for the Spatial Data Handling Conference in Vienna; and she just returned from a two-day workshop in Manchester, U.K., on visualization in Social Sciences. As if this were not enough, she is also working on a chapter of a book related to uncertainty visualization for social science data.

The near future looks full too. “I have always wanted to teach, so I think the Ph.D. programs in geography I just started at ASU are the continuation of the path my future career goals will follow,” Stephanie said. Somewhere along that path are also

such career interests as working for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and in the transportation engineering field.

“I feel,” she continues, “that my background in GIS and cartography will provide me with many potential career choices, as my education thus far has provided me with many unique opportunities that I would not have had otherwise. For example, when I am not in school, I now work on transportation GIS projects for the transportation engineer who first encouraged me to take a GIS class.”

CaGIS had a number of well qualified applicants for their scholarship in 2006—Stephanie was able to carry away the prize not only because she has an excellent academic background, but also, and

importantly, because she obviously has made that connection between personal professional goals and contributing professionally to the advancement of her chosen profession—geography.

Stephanie’s experience is remarkable in that it also demonstrates, beyond any doubt, how vital it is for any profession to encourage participation and sharing of experiences and ideas to create a common purpose. In Stephanie’s case there was, in the beginning, a private company that needed to enhance its core skills with GIS.

And then there was a professor whose lectures and mentoring planted a seed of that new career into an eager mind. The lesson here (and in the countless other cases that we do not get to hear about) is that a person who loves his or her profession and wants it to grow is her best recruiter!

Stephanie concurs. “I think the best way to get students involved in CaGIS activities (conferences, scholarship competitions, etc) is to have faculty and others encourage them to join and work to promote the organization and its activities. I would not have become involved if it hadn’t been for the initial encouragement of Rob and the continued support of my graduate committee, Rob Edsall, Elizabeth Wentz, and Richard Aspinall, and cartographer Barbara Trapido-Lurie.”

