

Elements of Cartography:
Serving the Community with
Cartography

Maps not only tell us where we want to go, they help us remember where we've been. Ohio State students made this a reality for themselves and for a Columbus neighborhood in the service-learning course Geography 580S: Elements of Cartography.

During winter quarter 2009, the students designed maps that illustrate access to services for near eastside Columbus residents. They worked closely with representatives from the Department of African American and African Studies Community Extension Center (CEC) and their partnering organizations, including Columbus Public Health, Columbus Urban League, Neighborhood House, Inc., Central Community House, and the Mt. Vernon Avenue District Improvement Association. Students mapped access to low-cost healthcare clinics, food pantries, stores that accepted food stamps and provided fresh fruits and vegetables, employment agencies, and after-school programs for children. They designed their maps as brochures or two-sided handouts so that the partnering organizations and other agencies could distribute these materials directly to residents. Students also created maps of historical points of pride, designed as posters for display in community gathering places such as the King Arts Complex, the MLK Library, and the Urban Spirit Coffee Shop. The posters could become a focal point for residents and local leaders to link the area's rich history to its present and future directions.

In the classroom, students learned cartography and map design elements, including the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software. Then they collected data, visited the neighborhood, and met several times with the community partners. They also engaged in critical reflection, a key element of service-learning that helped them consider such questions as What are some of the issues that exist in the community? How and why were these conditions created? and How does this project contribute to addressing these issues?

Some of the students had participated in service-learning before. However, Tammara Carr found this experience more enriching because of the close collaboration with the community. Caitlin Stone pointed out how the service project enhanced what they learned in class. "If you do a map of China, you don't actually get to go see what you've mapped. Doing a local community makes it real." All classes have deadlines and pressures, but Caitlin felt a different kind of pressure in meeting the expectations of community partners: "If you fail a course, you let yourself down. In this kind of project, you don't want to let other people down."

The experience was equally valuable for students new to service-learning. Kim Graham found the class more engaging and valued being able to present something meaningful as a result of the coursework. Although Adam Goerlitz was nearing the end of his undergraduate career, this was his first service-learning experience. "I'm disappointed that I didn't try service-learning earlier," he said.

The student teams presented the maps to more than 80 people at the Community Extension Center, generating much interest and discussion. One map that particularly struck a chord was dated 1962, showing the neighborhood before Interstate 71 divided it. Community members identified ways to use the maps and offered valuable feedback to improve the final versions. As a local genealogist pointed out, maps become part of history so they need to be as accurate as possible.

This project integrated elements of teaching, research, and service. Created with the support of a course development grant from the Service-Learning Initiative, Geography 580S is the first service-learning course to be offered in the Department of Geography, and it showed students a real-world application of cartography. The instructor, graduate research



Students display their poster with the help of Melvin Steward Sr, president of Mt. Vernon Avenue District Improvement Association. Photo by Michael Niedzielski. Below: one of the maps created by students.



associate Tim Hawthorne, used contacts and knowledge from his dissertation research with Dr. Mei-Po Kwan in the near eastside neighborhood to inform the project and in turn, the project will contribute to his investigation of inequitable access to healthcare. The students' brochures and posters will be a resource for community residents.

To have a lasting impact, projects such as this need to build on the momentum and positive community response. Some community members suggested next steps, such as finding ways for Ohio State students to collaborate with community youth. The students have been invited to present their work to Columbus City Council. The maps will not only be distributed in the neighborhood, but will also be available on a website being developed by the Department of Geography and CEC. This interdisciplinary project reaches across the Arts and Sciences divisions of Social and Behavioral Sciences and Arts and Humanities. Carla Wilks, Senior Outreach Program Coordinator at CEC, is hopeful that the research results from this collaboration will have an impact on future programs and services offered by area agencies and organizations. The collaboration also planted a seed for future partnerships across the university and with the community.

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