

Fall 2025

# Geography Newsletter

University of South Carolina Department of Geography

## From the Chair's Desk

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Dear Students, Colleagues, Alumni, and Friends,



USC Geography faculty  
exploring Columbia's urban  
landscapes during this year's  
Fall Faculty Retreat.

As Chair of the Department of Geography, I am pleased to welcome you to our fall newsletter. The start of a new academic year always brings fresh energy and opportunity, and this semester is no exception. Our department continues to thrive through groundbreaking research, meaningful community partnerships, and outstanding accomplishments of our students.

From Nevada to Namibia and all places in-between, our faculty and students demonstrate every day the vital role geography plays in understanding and improving our world.

In this issue, we are proud to share stories of faculty excellence, student achievements, new initiatives, and upcoming events at the University of South Carolina. We hope you find inspiration in these updates and join us in celebrating the momentum we are carrying into the year ahead.

Thank you for being an essential part of our community.

Sincerely,

Jerry Mitchell

*Professor and Chair, Department of Geography*

## Faculty and Staff Highlights

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**Dr. Caroline Nagel** spent her sabbatical researching international teachers coming to South Carolina via the JI cultural exchange program to address staffing shortages, especially in rural schools.

**Dr. April Hiscox's** sabbatical was focused on two NSF-sponsored projects, one on mesoscale-microscale flow interactions in the stable boundary layer, and the other on rural environments that included sensor installations in Allendale County.

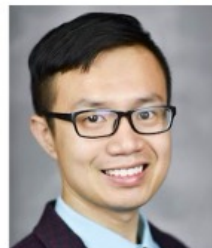
**Dr. John Kupfer** was named a Fellow of the American Association of Geographers for his work on ecological processes influenced by the environment and human activity.

**Dr. Cary Mock** received the 2025 AAG Media Achievement Award for his skill in communicating climate information to the broader public.

Caroline Nagel,  
April Hiscox,  
John Kupfer,  
and Cary Mock



Catherine Studemeyer,  
Robert Kopack,  
Sicheng Wang,  
and Meredith DeBoom



**Dr. Catherine Studemeyer**, a graduate of our Ph.D. program, was welcomed as a Senior Instructor in the Walker Institute of International and Area Studies.

**Dr. Robert Kopack** spent June conducting research in Brownsville, Texas, focusing on commercial space launches and their environmental impacts.

**Dr. Sicheng Wang** received a three-year grant from the South Carolina Department of Transportation to develop a GIS-based platform to improve the agency's environmental services workflow.

**Dr. Meredith DeBoom** continues her research on the geopolitical economy and ecology of low-carbon energy technologies, such as green hydrogen and nuclear energy, expanding her fieldwork in southern Africa to the Southeastern US.



Dr. Shadya Davis,  
Research Assistant  
Professor of Geography.

### *Faculty Spotlight — Dr. Shadya Davis*

**Dr. Shadya Davis** is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography. She earned her doctorate in Atmospheric Sciences from Howard University in 2022 and specializes in meteorology and its intersection with social science. Her position will convert to the Tenure Track in Fall 2026.

Her research focuses on how people perceive risk and take protective actions after disasters. Recently, she published work on the use of safety measures such as sirens and alert systems in areas vulnerable to flash floods. Dr. Davis emphasizes the importance of community perspectives in shaping disaster policies and incorporates the lived experiences of affected individuals into her research.

She considers joining the faculty at the University of South Carolina her greatest professional achievement, as it allows her to bring together her expertise and passion in one role.

Outside of her academic work, Dr. Davis enjoys spending time with her family, caring for her dog, and playing volleyball.

## Undergraduate Studies

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In August, **Dr. Conor Harrison**, Director of Undergraduate Studies, hosted a Welcome Back Gathering for all geography undergraduate students. The event provided an opportunity for students to connect with faculty, learn about the program, and meet new peers while hearing about upcoming student-focused activities.

Undergraduate students  
gather at the Department of  
Geography's Welcome Back  
event, August 2025.



This fall, **Dr. Robert Kopack** is continuing his work with students in Geography 495, a seminar course that partners undergraduates with local organizations to produce applied research. Past collaborations have included the South Carolina Department of Public Health, Congaree Riverkeeper, and the Central Midlands Council of Governments. Dr. Harrison notes that the course is an excellent way for students to apply what they have learned in meaningful, real-world contexts.

The department also introduced new course offerings this semester, including Web GIS Studio, taught by Kevin Haynes, USC's Geospatial Information Officer. This course provides students with hands-on experience in web-based geospatial technology, now the foundation of nearly all GIS applications.

With new courses, strong community partnerships, and engaging student-centered events, the undergraduate program is well-positioned for an exciting semester ahead.

### *Undergraduate Spotlight — Ford Tolar*



Ford Tolar hosting the  
Department of Geography's  
booth at last month's Student  
Organization Fair.

**Ford Tolar**, set to graduate this year, excels both in and outside the classroom. He serves as a Geospatial Analyst in the U.S. National Guard, President of the Geography Club, and is active in USC's ROTC, Veterans program, and the Midlands Bird Society.

His interest in maps began in childhood when his parents encouraged him and his siblings to navigate road trips with paper maps. As a geography major with a GIS emphasis, Ford has worked on several projects, including a collaboration with Dr. Sicheng Wang to map South Carolina's top barbecue restaurants and their regional styles.

In his role with the National Guard, Ford analyzes satellite imagery to support helicopter navigations and trains fellow soldiers in map reading, especially during deployments abroad. He credits his military experience with giving him a strong foundation in geography and enjoys sharing knowledge with classmates and faculty.

As he completes his undergraduate degree, Ford looks forward to strengthening the Geography Club and encouraging more students to explore opportunities within the department. In his free time, he enjoys being with family and friends.



## Graduate Studies

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**Dr. Caroline Nagel**, Director of Graduate Studies, shares that our Graduate Program has had an active and productive year, with students engaged in impactful research both locally and globally.

This past summer, doctoral students **Ola Omomeji** and **Ben Marosites** led a heat-mapping project sponsored by the South Carolina Public Health Association. Alongside master's student **Lalon Swaney**, Professor **Kirstin Dow**, and community volunteers, they collected temperature and humidity data across Columbia using mobile sensors. Ola is developing a temperature and heat index surface model from this data to identify strategies for reducing urban heat-island effects.



Graduate students and faculty conducting heat-mapping fieldwork in Columbia. Above, grad students Ben Marosites (left) and Lalon Swaney; right, Marosites, retired faculty member Kirstin Dow, and grad student Ola Omomeji.



New doctoral student **Hadijja Nakawooya** recently published in *PloS One* based on her master's research at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health. Her study examined the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns and severe flooding on HIV risk behaviors and treatment outcomes in Ugandan fishing community. The findings highlight community resilience and the effectiveness of HIV programming during crises.

Second-year master's student **Pengyu Chen** has co-authored a paper in the *International Journal of Remote Sensing* with Professors **Susan Wang** and **Sicheng Wang**, along with colleagues in China. Originating from an advanced remoting sensing class assignment, the paper demonstrates how

machine-learning models can improve rooftop detection in archival black-and-white aerial photos by applying colorization and super-resolution techniques. This work provides valuable tools for tracking urban development over time.

Ph.D. student Jill Thornton conducted six months of fieldwork in Germany.



Doctoral students also extended their work internationally this summer. **Jill Thornton** completed fieldwork in Germany examining the role of international Christian missionaries in refugee resettlement while **Bianca Malkoc** studied Serbian language in Belgrade in preparation for her dissertation research on political debates surrounding copper mining in rural Serbia.

### *Graduate Field Experience*

Professors **Jerry Mitchell** and **Caroline Nagel** led newly admitted graduate students on a field trip to South Carolina's Piedmont region to explore its cultural and physical diversity. The group visited key sites including Winnsboro, Chester, Landsford Canal State Park, and Great Falls.



Graduate students exploring South Carolina's Piedmont region.

### *Graduate Awards*

We are proud to recognize geography graduate student **Jessica Flach**, who has received the 2025 AAG Critical Geographies of Education Specialty Group Thesis Award.

Her thesis examines the reworking of civic education in Florida, focusing on school messaging, the role of educational travel companies, and recent legislative changes.



Jessica Flach, Ph.D. student

### *Graduate Spotlight — Madison Nordberg*

**Madison Nordberg** earned her B.S. in Environmental Science from the University of South Carolina in 2024. As an undergraduate, she became involved with the Hazards Vulnerability and Resilience Institute (HVRI), an experience that deepened her interest in geography and provided a strong sense of community within the department.

Now a second-year master's student, Madison focuses her research on heat adaption, climate change, and social vulnerability. Under the advisement of **Dr. April Hiscox**, her thesis examines heat communication and decision-making using heat information. She also serves as a Research Assistant with HVRI, contributing to the NSF *Where We Live* project, which studies heat, drought, and wildlife impacts in Allendale County, SC. Her work includes surveying residents about their lived experiences with changing weather conditions.

Beyond her academic research, Madison is the Publicist and Social Media Content Creator for the Geography Graduate Student Association and interns with the South Carolina Department of Transportation, assisting with environmental compliance projects through the Office of Environmental Services. Her GIS skills help connect environmental considerations with transportation planning.

Madison is also part of the CSTAR team within HVRI, where she contributed to the development of a Heat Risk Forecast tool that informs her thesis and represents her first publishable manuscript.

Outside of her studies, Madison enjoys crocheting, reading, photography, exploring Columbia, and spending time with her cat, Whiskey.



Graduate student Madison Nordberg stands by a construction plan map highlighting environmentally sensitive areas for an SCDOT project.



## Alumni

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We want to keep up with our University of South Carolina geography graduates, and we know that you do too! Stay connected with us and the program's current events by joining our Alumni mailing list. Send an email with your name and the year you graduated to the Student Services Coordinator, **Sena Nickles**, at [nickless@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:nickless@mailbox.sc.edu).

### *USC Geography Alumni Award Nominations Now Open*

We are accepting nominations for our Distinguished Alumni award through December 15, 2025. Both undergraduate and graduate alumni are eligible. A nomination consists of two letters, one from the nominator that includes the nominee's name, degree, and year of graduation along with a statement on the nominee's achievements, leadership, service, and advocacy for geography. The second is a recommendation letter from someone other than the nominator. Both the nomination letter and the recommendation letter should be sent together by the nominator to our Student Services Coordinator, Sena Nickles, at [nickless@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:nickless@mailbox.sc.edu). The awardee will be announced in Spring 2026.

### *Alumni Spotlight — Dr. Daniel Keenen*



Alumnus Dr. Daniel Keenen  
with his wife and child.

**Dr. Daniel Keenen's** interest in geography began in high school through an AP Human Geography course. He earned his B.A. in geography and Russian Studies from the University of South Carolina in 2017, where he was awarded the Julian Petty Award for academic excellence. He went on to complete his Ph.D. in geography at Texas A&M University in 2023.

During his academic journey, Daniel valued geography's broad scope and its connections across disciplines. He also served in the U.S. Army Reserve while completing his studies.

Currently, Dr. Keenen works as a data scientist at Booz Allen Hamilton in Washington, D.C. His role combines human geography, qualitative research, and advanced quantitative methods, including machine learning and statistical analysis, to support U.S. government projects. His work focuses on identifying inefficiencies in business processes and developing data-driven solutions.

Outside of his professional career, Daniel enjoys playing and watching soccer and spending time with his family.



## Around Callcott and Campus

### *Geography's Colloquium Series*

The department opened the academic year with two well-attended colloquia. **Dr. Jessica Barnes**, faculty member in geography and SEOE, presented the harmful effects of mold and moisture in London homes, with a focus on impacts within low-income communities.



Dr. Jessica Barnes (left) and Dr. Brett Robertson present their research.



**Dr. Brett Robertson**, Associate Director of HVRI and faculty member in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, discussed how geography and communication can work together to improve disaster preparedness and response for events such as flooding and wildfires.

Visit our department's website to find more information regarding upcoming colloquia.

### *SCARC Conference*

We had a great time earlier this year at the 2025 SC Arc Users Conference. Attendees, faculty, students, and alumni connected and discussed internship and job opportunities at the Alumni Mixer.

USC Alumni Center hosted the state's annual ARC Users Conference (SCARC) in September. The Department of Geography participated, providing networking time for students and alumni.



### *McCausland College of Arts and Sciences*

As an alumnus of the Department of Geography, you are also part of the university's McCausland College of Arts and Sciences. [Connect with McCausland College and other USC departments.](#)

### *Support Our Mission*

USC Geography is successful in part due to the generous support of our alumni and friends. Your donations fund scholarships, student research travel, and the incoming graduate student field experience among other things. If you would like to help support geography's students and programs, you can visit our [Giving](#) page.

### **Upcoming Events**

Do not miss out on the latest events taking place within the Department of Geography. Visit our [department calendar](#) to learn about upcoming colloquia, the annual Minghi Lecture, and other events.

### *We Want to Hear from You*

Share geography related pictures, videos, stories, or spotlight suggestions with us for our next newsletter. Contact **Sena Nickles**, Student Services Coordinator, at [nickless@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:nickless@mailbox.sc.edu).

