

Spring 2026

Geography Newsletter

University of South Carolina Department of Geography



Department Chair Dr. Jerry Mitchell, International Geographical Union Commission on Geography Education in Stellenbosch,

From the Chair's Desk

Dear Students, Colleagues, Alumni, and Friends,

As spring returns to campus, I find myself reflecting on the time we've shared together in the Department of Geography. Each year brings new faces and new energy, and I am reminded why our work matters so deeply.

From the undergraduate students discovering the excitement of our discipline to the faculty and graduate students conducting research that reaches from South Carolina to every corner of the world, our department continues to embody the curiosity and purpose that define geography. It has been a privilege to witness your accomplishments and your commitment to understanding and improving our planet.

This spring issue highlights just a few of the many ways our community is thriving through innovative research and teaching, and the everyday dedication that makes this department exceptional.

As I prepare to step down as Chair, I do so with deep gratitude. Serving in this role has been a rewarding experience and I am confident that the department's future is bright. Thank you for your support and your shared belief in the power of geography to make a difference.

With appreciation,

Jerry Mitchell

Professor and (Outgoing) Chair, Department of Geography

Faculty and Staff Highlights

Dr. Jean Ellis is working to highlight the importance of high tide flooding within the state and coordinate beach preservation activities.

Dr. Dean Hardy is working on several federally funded projects that include monitoring long-term changes in flood risk for a Saltwater Geechee community (Georgia) and examining narratives of environmental justice and flood risk infrastructure (Mississippi).

Dr. Conor Harrison has started a new project examining the impacts of AI data centers on the electricity grid that builds on his past research looking at the changing U.S. electricity industry.

Clockwise from top left:
Jean Ellis, Dean Hardy,
Conor Harrison, Susan
Wang, Jerry Mitchell,
and David Kneas.



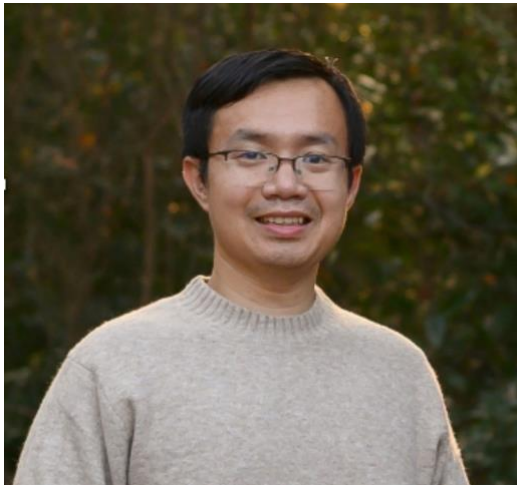
Dr. David Kneas is currently finishing a co-authored book manuscript on the cultural practices of authenticity in relation to social media and contemporary systems of value.

Dr. Jerry Mitchell was named a Fellow of the American Association of Geographers for his research on teaching and learning in geography and his support for educators nationally and internationally.

Dr. Susan Wang received an internal grant to study the impact of foreign direct investment on spatial inequality of urbanization using satellite nighttime imagery.

Faculty Spotlight – Dr. Sicheng Wang

Dr. Sicheng Wang is an Assistant Professor and the Director of the Center for GIScience and Geospatial Big Data. He joined USC in 2023 after completing a two-year NSF postdoctoral fellowship at Michigan State University and earned his Ph.D. in Planning and Public Policy from Rutgers University in 2021.



Dr. Wang’s research focuses on urban and transportation planning, particularly analyzing traffic patterns, travel behavior, and accessibility. His work combines advanced GIScience and GeoAI approaches with a wide range of quantitative and qualitative social science methodologies to address critical infrastructure and access issues. More recently, he has led projects addressing public health, safety, climate change, and hazard resilience from a transportation perspective, securing approximately \$2 million in external grants. He teaches courses in GIS, transportation, and cartography, and was selected as a Provost’s Inaugural AI Teaching Fellow in 2024.

Dr. Sicheng Wang

Beyond teaching, Dr. Wang actively contributes to professional organizations. He serves on the board of Transportation Geography Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers and is a member of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. He also serves on the SC Palmetto Active Transportation Committee. Outside of academia, Dr. Wang enjoys painting and proudly displays some of his artwork in his office.

Undergraduate Studies

GEOG 495 students showcase their semester-long research with community partners.

At the end of the fall semester, students in GEOG 495 – our capstone degree course led by **Dr. Robert Kopack** – showcased their semester-long research projects in partnership with community organizations. This annual



tradition is a cornerstone of the program, providing students with valuable, hands-on experience and preparing them to enter the workforce as professional geographers.

Looking ahead to spring, we are excited to offer a diverse lineup of courses, including timely new additions such as *Geographies of Russia and Central Asia* and *Global Health Geographies*. The spring semester also features a full schedule of undergraduate activities, including welcome-back events, Awards Day, and an alumni mixer, fostering connection and engagement across our community.

Gamma Theta Upsilon (GTU) Inductees

Congratulations to the new inductees of Gamma Theta Upsilon! On behalf of the University of South Carolina Kappa Psi Chapter, we are honored to recognize 11 undergraduate geography majors and minors for their excellence in geography with their admission to the honor society.

- Molly Asher, *Senior*
- Matthew Botteon, *Senior*
- William Chandler, *Senior*
- Eric Gomez, *Senior*
- Regan Ariana Hill, *Senior*
- Jack Jeffrey, *December 2025 Graduate*
- Colin Kasavicha, *Senior*
- Andrew Mims, *Junior*
- Caleb Podolski, *Senior*
- Elizabeth Radecki, *Senior*
- Catherine Roach, *Senior*



Eric Gomez

Undergraduate Spotlight – Eric Gomez

Eric Gomez discovered geography while pursuing his degree in Spanish and chose to double major to align his academic path with both interests. After completing courses in climate and society, he developed a strong passion for the field, inspired in part by the engaging teaching of **Dr. Greg Carbone** and **Dr. April Hiscox**.

Expected to graduate in May 2026, Eric has been involved in several geography-related projects. His most recent collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Public Health focused on improving access to accurate STI-related medical information across the Midlands and surrounding areas of South Carolina. Working with his peers, Eric helped create informative maps highlighting regions with elevated STI rates. He

believes this type of applied work strengthens communities, noting, “If it saves even one life, then it matters.”

On campus, Eric is actively engaged both academically and through service. He is a member of the Geography Club, an inductee of Gamma Theta Upsilon (GTU) in recognition of academic excellence in geography, and a member of the Spanish Honor Society, Sigma Delta Pi. He also tutors University of South Carolina students in Spanish. Beyond campus, Eric volunteers as a Spanish translator with Lutheran Services Carolina, where he assists refugees with medical appointments, job orientations, and community education.

In his free time, Eric rescues and rehabilitates abandoned dogs, ensuring their safety, especially during the colder months. After graduation, he plans to pursue a master’s degree in Spanish at the University of South Carolina, with long-term goals of teaching at the college level and eventually earning a PhD.

Graduate Studies

Director of Graduate Studies, **Dr. Caroline Nagel**, is pleased to highlight graduate students who have recently defended their proposals and are now beginning their dissertation and thesis research.

- **Olarewaju Omomeji**, PhD student, is exploring climate change and adaptation to rising heat and humidity in the southeastern United States.
- **Ben Marosites**, PhD student, will examine the measurement of nighttime dispersion of air particles in shallow terrain.
- **Pengyu Chen**, master’s student, is developing a vision-language model framework to assess urban soundscapes.

These students will also present their research at the upcoming AAG Annual Meeting in San Francisco, providing a valuable opportunity to share their work with the broader academic community.

Graduate Spotlight – Nelson Kowu

Nelson Kowu brings a global perspective to the USC Geography Department. Originally from Ghana, he earned his bachelor’s degree in environmental science from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology before completing a master’s degree at the University of West



Nelson Kowu

Florida, where he developed a strong interest in environmental justice. “I wanted to look at environmental issues through a critical social science lens,” Nelson explains. His master’s thesis examined how historic planning and infrastructure decisions have created long-lasting environmental risks for vulnerable rural coastal communities. This research was recently published in the journal *Environmental Justice*, marking his first lead-author publication.

Now a second-year PhD student at USC, Nelson studies environmental governance and the ways policies and institutions shape human-environment relationships. His research focuses on rural coastal regions in the United States, examining how communities respond to hurricanes, flooding, and other climate-related challenges. He has conducted fieldwork alongside **Dr. Dean Hardy** and fellow graduate students in the Mississippi Delta, collaborating with residents, farmers, conservation organizations, and government agencies to better understand local responses to climate impacts.

Looking ahead, Nelson aspires to pursue a career in academia while also exploring opportunities in environmental consulting. Outside of his academic work, he enjoys cooking, trying new restaurants, painting, walking along the West Columbia Riverwalk, and spending time with his church community.

Alumni

Alumni Mixer

We’re excited to host this year’s Alumni Mixer! Join fellow alumni, current students, and faculty for a casual gathering at the Callcott Social Sciences Building. Past events have been a great chance for alumni to share career experiences, internships, and job opportunities, and learn what’s new in the department. The event will be held on **Wednesday, April 1, 2026, from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.** If you would like to attend, please contact **Sena Nickles** at nickless@mailbox.sc.edu. We hope to see you there!

Undergraduate Mentors Wanted!

We are seeking mentors to support and encourage our undergraduate students. As a mentor, you’ll act as a friendly guide offering guidance and encouragement as students navigate their geography degree. If you’re interested, please complete the [Mentorship Opportunity form](#) and we will reach out to you for the next steps.

USC Geography Alumni: Stay Updated on Program News & Events

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 graduation year to the Student Services Coordinator, Sena Nickles, at nickless@mailbox.sc.edu.

Alumni Spotlight – Yelena Kalashnikova

Yelena Kalashnikova's passion for geography began in childhood, inspired by nature and travel shows, and grew in high school in early-1990s Russia, where her teacher introduced her to places beyond her country. She pursued this interest academically at Moscow State Pedagogical University, participating in an international exchange program and interning with the U.S. National Park Service. She earned a master's in regional and urban planning from East Tennessee State University, followed by a master's in Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing (GIS) from the University of South Carolina in 2003, gaining expertise in data collection, analysis, and mapping.



Yelena Kalashnikova

For the past 14 years, Yelena has served at the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT), now as Director of Road Data Services. She leads a team of professionals that employ interactive systems, applications, and methods to collect, manage, and report statewide road and bridge inventory and other spatial data for SCDOT, using newest technologies like LiDAR. She also supervises the cartography unit producing multitude of maps including the official SC State Highway System maps which state residents and visitors can see in the welcome centers and rest areas of South Carolina. She emphasizes connecting with peers nationwide to explore new approaches, professional development, and emerging technologies such as AI, data governance, digital delivery, and open data, continually researching ways to improve precision and optimize data collection.

Yelena is active in professional organizations, including the Transportation Research Board (TRB), the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP), the Committee on Data Systems and Governance, and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).

She encourages everyone to take at least one geography course, stating “geography is a huge swath of knowledge that helps us understand the world and see how different phenomena and environments influence each other – not just on a high level, but in everyday life.”

In her free time, Yelena enjoys spending time with her family and cooking and baking recipes that blend her native country with the United States, creating a delicious mix of flavors.

Distinguished Alumni Award – Amy Barron



Amy Barron, BA 1998, was the winner of the department’s 2026 Distinguished Alumni Award. Amy has been an advocate for geography and geospatial technology for more than 25 years. She was recently promoted to Director of GIS and Analytics at Duke Energy. Congratulations, Amy!

Amy Barron

Around Callcott and Campus

Minghi Distinguished Lectureship



Dr. Brian King of Penn State University will deliver the annual Minghi Distinguished Lecture on April 24. The Minghi Distinguished Lectureship honors outstanding scholars who have made significant contributions to the discipline of geography. This lectureship is named in honor of the late **Professor Emeritus Julian V. Minghi**, who retired from the University of South Carolina’s Department of Geography in 2001 after 28 years of dedicated service.

Dr. Brian King



SEDAAG Conference

The department was represented by current faculty, students, and alumni at the 2025 Southeastern Division of the American Association of Geographers conference in Lexington, Kentucky.

From the left: Pete Tereszkievicz, Sarah Jackson, and Mike Mewborne.

Congaree Research Symposium

USC Geography faculty and students at the 2026 Congaree Research Symposium.

From the left: Bill Stangler, John Kupfer, Kimberly Meitzen, and Bob Janiskee



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.

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.

