

Geography and Liberal Education

Life and a liberal education are similar in that there are more questions than answers. In both, the journey is often more important than the destination. Although one cannot ignore the value of the product, in some ways the process of knowing and engaging one's world is more important than any particular outcome. In the view of the Department of Geography and Planning, a liberal education helps equip students with the conceptual and investigatory tools necessary to engage the world, make sense of it, and enable students to acquire the concepts, principles, and skills necessary to find a place in that world.

The discipline of Geography is ancient and has long been part of the liberal education enterprise. A liberal education is one that provides a broad academic and intellectual framework within which students can freely develop their world view (political, social, religious, and other philosophies) in preparation for participation in civil society and life.

The philosophy, principles, and practices of the Department of Geography and Planning are part of the liberal education enterprise in two ways. First, we strongly believe that our graduates must be able to apply a systematic, empirical method to their understanding of social and natural phenomena. Although they may appear simple on the surface, fundamental geographic questions such as the following are actually incredibly profound. For example:

1. What is there?
2. What is its extent?
3. How much is there?
4. Why is it there?
5. Why isn't it elsewhere?
6. Where could it be?
7. Was it there in the past?
8. Will it be there in the future?

Fundamental but profound questions such as these – focused on space, place, and time – are part of Geography's contribution to understanding the world. In addition, Geography certainly has a robust set of tools to investigate these spatio-temporal questions.

Our second contribution to the formation of our students in the Liberal Education tradition is focused on the use of geographic tools and methods. We challenge our students to develop a common analytical skill set to help them answer in an empirical and rigorous manner the big (and not so big) questions. Tools such as the Geographic Information System (GIS), statistical cartography, remote sensing, regional analysis, and a variety of other geostatistical methods, a truly global perspective, and a capstone (GPY495) in which original research is required help develop in our students an ability to understand a problem and to address it in a systematic way, generating new knowledge. These skills, coupled with geographic concepts and principles, help students transition easily into life beyond GVSU.

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