

## **SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY'S ONLINE PH.D. STUDENTS IN GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION**

July 27, 2022

In the midst of a record heatwave in central Texas and chaotic travel circumstances, Texas State University geography education doctoral students and a small select group of geography educators from across the country descended upon San Marcos to participate in a full day Leadership Academy to focus on major issues and future research opportunities and responsibilities within the world of geography education.

**Background Information on the Ph.D. Program:** In 2020, the Texas State University Department of Geography and Environmental Studies established the very first 100% online doctoral program on campus in geographic education. The Ph.D. in geographic education degree program, which was also the first in-residence doctoral program on campus back in 2000, was submitted to be transitioned to online and was approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board at the start of Fall 2020.

That inaugural year there were 12 students admitted to the geographic education doctoral program, a significant increase from years prior due solely to the fact that these students are K-16 teachers with a full-time job who cannot relocate to pursue a graduate degree. The students hail from parts of North Texas - like Waco, Glen Rose, Midland, and Dallas – as well as Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and even Saudi Arabia! Since that first year in 2020, five more students have been admitted to the program from Texas, Illinois, and Maine.

**Leadership Academy Rationale:** The Leadership Academy started as an initiative to provide a sense of community for the online students and bring everyone together to meet face-to-face. For second- and third-year students it allowed them to connect their coursework to broader teaching and research opportunities through thoughtful exchange of ideas. While incoming students had the chance to connect with the other students and prepare for what's to come. However, the chance to turn the meeting into a bigger opportunity to connect Ph.D. students and build a network with other geography educators in the discipline was soon realized. Since many conferences had gone virtual and the normal networking channels were reduced, Drs. Richard G. Boehm and Michael Solem, two of the department's geographic education faculty, knew how important an opportunity like this Leadership Academy would be for the Ph.D. students' future careers. Invited by Drs. Boehm and Solem, and organized by Dr. Joanna Zadrozny, a mixture of senior scholars, practicing geography educators, and online students from three different cohorts participated in the Leadership Academy.

The content and research agenda for the Leadership Academy was derived from current issues originally discussed during a roundtable discussion on the future of geography education at the end of 2019. The

four major topics were 1) Advanced Placement Human Geography, 2) powerful geography, 3) institutional well-being, and 4) early career faculty research responsibilities for new Ph.Ds. Background research papers were assigned in each of these categories for participants to prepare for day-of discussion.

Thanks to funding from the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education, the Academy was paid for, and all participant travel costs were covered. In addition, the Grosvenor Center hosted an informal reception the night before as participants arrived. The reception was a great opportunity for everyone to meet, talk, and mingle before a full day of discussions. As an online program, the students never met one another or their instructors face-to-face, so it provided a great moment for them to truly connect, interact, and feel like a Bobcat.

**Leadership Academy:** On Wednesday, July 27, a full-day Leadership Academy convened at the Embassy Suites that included 11 online Ph.D. students in geographic education and six geography education faculty mentors that agreed to share their wisdom, insight, and guidance with this next generation of researchers and scholars. Two other faculty leaders had agreed to participate, yet last-minute travel disruptions prevented their attendance. Each session followed the same format, with a leader (Dr. Boehm or Dr. Solem) setting the stage and context of the session. Next, faculty consultants were assigned to each session based upon their background to carry on the conversation and pose discussion questions to the whole group.

The morning sessions consisted of lively discussions on the topics of Advanced Placement (AP) Human Geography © and Powerful Geography. Dr. Susan Hume, professor at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville, discussed research opportunities and undertakings that should be carried out in AP Human Geography that tackle issues such as diversity, equity, access, and inclusion. Many of these issues begin to be addressed in a forthcoming issue of *Journal of Geography* comprised of research articles focusing on the last 20 years of AP Human Geography data. These articles were provided to participants to discuss what research opportunities can be expanded on.

Powerful Geography, a teaching and learning framework developed by the Grosvenor Center, focuses on individual student interests and career aspirations to teach geography and making geographic knowledge relevant. Powerful Geography was discussed by Dr. Carmen Brysch, instructional assistant professor at Texas A&M University, regarding benefits and challenges of such an approach in the classroom. While, Dr. Joseph Kerski, geography education manager for ESRI, provided his technological perspective as to how important it is to help educators apply geographic knowledge with geospatial technology and spatial thinking. He provided insight that various businesses, NGOs, government agencies, non-profits, and academe are using geospatial technology to map data but the value of understanding what geography is and the interconnections of systems is still needed, and Powerful Geography is one way to get people thinking like a geographer.

Afternoon sessions provided insight into the future of professional expectations for the online Ph.D. students. The third session focused on institutional well-being, which includes geography education's

organizations, such as the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE). President-elect of NCGE and high school Texas teacher Greg Hill provided everyone with plans for strengthening the organization and highlighted the value geography education researchers provide to the success of the organization. Newly appointed chair of the Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP) and former Nebraska Department of Education specialist/director of social studies, Harris Payne, discussed his successes in building partnerships with social studies organizations to spread the importance and value of geography.

The fourth and final session, led by Dr. Jacqueline Housel, chair/professor of Geography/GIS at Sinclair Community College, focused on the sustainability of future selves and how that will reflect in the Ph.D. students' research pursuits in graduate school and beyond. The Ph.D. students conversed about their passions, how that relates to their research interests, and how they plan to sustain their research agenda throughout their career.

By the end of the 8-hour session, the Ph.D. students were introduced to new mentors and created lifelong colleagues. The online Ph.D. students commented on how much they appreciated the opportunity to convene face-to-face, expand their network, and learn about the importance of what their research degree stands for. And as one faculty mentor stated, "the future is in good hands".



From left to right: Harris Payne, Greg Hill, Bren Vander Weil (Ph.D. student), Dr. Richard Boehm, Samantha Serrano (Ph.D. student), Kelly Nolan (Ph.D. student), Licia Paulus (Ph.D. student), Dr. Joanna Zdrozny, Lisa Elikan (Ph.D. student), Brandi LeRoy (Ph.D. student), Jan Rueschhoff (Ph.D. student), Skylar Slaughter (Ph.D. student), Dr. Michael Solem, Lisa Griffith (Ph.D. student), Dr. Jacqueline Housel, Omonyale Ahohuendo (Ph.D. student), Michael Dahmer (Ph.D. student), Dr. Carmen Brysch, Dr. Joseph Kerski. Missing from photo: Dr. Susan Hume