

UTK Data and GIS Users Brown-Bag Discussion
February 20, 2001
Hodges Library
Summary of Discussion

The meeting began shortly after noon in the Faculty Lounge, with fourteen (14) attendees. The group was diverse in position, organization, and function. Attendees included seven librarians and staff from the University Libraries (Hodges, Map, Ag/Vet Med); two faculty members; the manager of the Statistical Consulting Center; the head of the State Data Center (CBER); a DII staff member who is working on digital initiatives with the library; and two doctoral students from the College of Social Work.

Jane Row opened the discussion with a brief explanation of why the library wanted to gather together data and GIS users. We wanted to hear from data users about the data they are using, problems they encounter in the process, and what services the library or other UTK organizations could/should provide. She also mentioned that the library would be willing to organize meetings like this on a periodic basis if there is an interest.

Ellie Read explained that she is particularly interested in finding out what kinds of data and data services researchers need so she can advance data services in the library. She offered handouts on data services, ICPSR, and statistical consulting.

Jim Minton explained that GIS is everywhere these days, and it is most definitely inter/multi-disciplinary. He offered handouts for the Map library and a catalog of cartographic data, and had several examples of geo-spatial CD-ROMs.

We then went around the table and each person introduced him/herself and said a little about why he/she was there.

Problems, comments, clarifications, ideas, etc. that were mentioned include:

Greer Fox indicated that she and her students have, in the past, found wonderful data sets to use for their research, but then have had trouble getting them open. Sometimes they can't even get to the point of being able to analyze the data, so they drop the data set and use something else that is more user friendly (and not necessarily the most appropriate resource). When the students looked for help at the library or the Statistical Computing Center (SCC), they often did not get the assistance that they needed. Bob Muenchen allowed that the Help Desk sometimes doesn't do a very good job connecting callers with the right technical person. If the students get referred to the statistical consultants, they should receive the assistance they need.

Suggestion: When we download/acquire data from a source, create the file(s) that are ready to use in statistical programming packages such as SPSS and SAS. That is, run the raw data files and the data definition (setup) files through the stat package and create the end product SAS or SPSS dataset(s) that have all the data and metadata before giving it/them to the patron. This is done by some data libraries.

Shih-Lung Shaw asked if there is any type of GIS center (like SCC) that faculty or students with GIS questions can go to. It seems that there are pockets of GIS activity around campus (e.g., geography labs, individual researchers, SCC, Map Library), where people will help when they can, but there is no central multidisciplinary source of GIS support. We need something like this to be a first stop for GIS questions, with staff knowledgeable in the types of data encountered (e.g., TIGER files are not compatible with any major GIS software package; they need to be converted first), and the technical software used for mapping (e.g., ArcInfo).

Bob Muenchen said he has made a proposal to use central funding to provide GIS and mathematical computing support services to the university community, much like SCC does now with statistical assistance. The proposal included faculty members in the Geography and Mathematics departments, as

well as non-faculty technical people. The faculty would teach in their respective departments, but also would be part-time consultants in the SCC, thereby providing centralized support in these areas. Referrals to the experts would be handled through the central call center. His recommendations were made after looking at the services provided by “top 25” and peer institutions.

Note: Currently the mapping that SCC does is thematic statistical maps, not full GIS.

Several voiced concerns that someone who calls the Help Desk with a question is likely to get bounced around from one “expert” to another, and each time he/she has to restate the question. This is frustrating and inefficient. A suggestion was made for a way to track the response to a caller’s problem, including where (to whom) he/she was referred and the action taken. This way if someone does get sent to another consultant, that person can see what the problem is and what has already been done, without making the caller go through it again.

Several noted that some of the problems encountered with using data and/or getting the right assistance are a result of lack of GIS literacy. That is, when a researcher doesn’t fully understand the terminology or what a data set contains, among other things, he/she may not articulate his/her question very well when seeking assistance from the Help Desk or others. Future idea: work on promoting/increasing GIS literacy.

Even though UTK has several services that aim to help faculty and students conduct secondary research, there currently is not seamless interaction between/among them. Each service has promotional material, some with referrals to other services, but there is not a single consolidated information source for taking a researcher through the process identifying, obtaining, manipulating, analyzing, mapping, interpreting, and presenting data. Idea: Create a multi-service brochure and/or web page that illustrates this flow of activity with appropriate contacts.

Greer Fox recommended promoting data services to faculty as the best way to get to the students, since they learn from the faculty in classes, and are advised by them on research projects. Promoting to PhD program directors may also be a good way to reach graduate students, as is promoting directly to graduate students in research methods classes and thesis packets distributed by the Graduate School.

Betty Vickers reminded us that she is a “one-woman shop,” and therefore, she doesn’t have the resources to help all callers identify and access census data. She may be able to refer them to the proper census product on the web or may send them over to the library. She offered to advise us if we are stumped on a particular kind of census data, as she has contacts with the Bureau of the Census.

Greer Fox feels that the American Community Survey will be a “rich” source of data.

The group agreed that it would be useful to meet again. We decided to try once a semester. Next time we will announce the meeting through Research Good News (Zoe Hoyle), as well as sending a letter.

Attendees:

Library: Jane Row (Hodges), Jim Minton (Map), Eleanor Read (Hodges), Janette Prescod (Hodges), Sandy Leach (Ag/VetMed), Margaret Mellinger (Ag/VetMed), Dorothy Sharp (Ag/VetMed)

Faculty: Greer L. Fox (Child and Family Studies), Shih-Lung Shaw (Geography)

DII: Bob Muenchen (SCC), Chris Hodge

CBER: Betty Vickers

Doctoral Students: Nancy Meyer-Adams, Alex Washington

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