

## It Was Roger's Idea David DiBiase

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Ten years ago, the Department of Geography wasn't even thinking about distance education. None of us paid much attention when, in his 1996 State of the University address, President Spanier shared his vision of a new "World Campus" that would "change the shape of the land-grant university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Even I hardly noticed, despite the fact that the Deasy GeoGraphics Laboratory had carved out a marginal niche in animated and interactive multimedia applications for earth science education. As Lab



director and as an instructor, I remained preoccupied with face-to-face undergraduate education. Fast-forward to 2007: the number of adult students participating in our distance education programs, including the Master of GIS (MGIS) degree and Certificate Program in GIS, now outnumbered by a wide margin those who seek Geography degrees on campus. How did we get here?

It was Roger's idea. Roger, and his friend and Geography alum (1980) James Meyer. Jim was then one of the people at Penn State Outreach who were responsible for identifying the best prospects for new online certificate and degree programs to be offered through the new World Campus. Jim was aware that the demand for skillful and knowledgeable GIS practitioners was strong, and that the Department of Geography was well-regarded in the field. The University had recently attracted a \$1.3 million grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to help start up the World Campus. Jim met with Roger, who seized upon the opportunity to attract investment in the Department and the Deasy Lab. Sometime in Spring 1997, Roger invited me to design and manage a new distance education program in GIS. I could hardly imagine the impact that opportunity would have on my career, and on the Department.

At the time I was pretty naïve about the process of planning and implementing an academic program. All the program design decisions we made in 1997-98 followed from one simple question: “What can we do to help adult learners advance their careers in one year of part-time online study, while they continue to work full-time?” The answer turned out to be a sequence of four instructor-led courses, each offered four times a year in compressed, ten-week terms.

Whether by design or by good luck, Roger’s idea paid off. Since the program’s launch in 1999, annual enrollments have increased nearly ten-fold from 143 to over 1,300 in 2006-07. An outstanding team of course authors and instructors, the World Campus’ marketing efforts, and buzz generated by over 800 enthusiastic graduates all have strengthened the Department’s financial position. Equally important, however, the World Campus programs have strengthened the Department’s reputation. The Special Achievement in GIS award conferred by ESRI in 2004 reflects the respect our distance education initiative has earned among GIS professionals.

Roger deserves much of the credit for this achievement. He seized the opportunity decisively, while minimizing the Department’s exposure to financial risk. He kept the faith during the early years when the Certificate program, and the people associated with it, was vulnerable. He supported efforts to welcome as colleagues the practitioner faculty upon whom our World Campus programs depend. He challenged us to build on our successes, inviting proposals to expand the Certificate Program to a full-fledged professional masters degree in 2004, and for a new Postbaccalaureate Certificate Program in Geospatial Intelligence in 2006. As President Spanier predicted, the World Campus has indeed changed the shape of the Department of Geography at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It’s no coincidence that it happened on Roger’s watch.