

Regional

Shaw studies the geography of affluence

The growing gap between the haves and the have-nots in America has surfaced in warnings from economists, stump speeches by politicians, and has even served as inspiration for movements like Occupy Wall Street. Some geographers look at issues involving the distribution of people and money. One such person is Wendy Shaw, a professor in the department of geography and an associate dean in the college of arts and sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Shaw was born in Oldham, England. She obtained her bachelor's degree in secondary education in social sciences at the University of Arkansas and a master's degree at the same university in geography. She later earned her doctorate in geography at the University of Georgia.

The study of the distribution of money may help us understand some questions that have baffled researchers for decades, such as why certain areas remain always poor while rich people tend to congregate in certain places. For many, this may sound like an odd topic to occupy the work of a geographer.

"There is a huge disconnect between how geography is taught in high school and how it is taught at the university level," Shaw said. "When you learn geography in high school it is typically regionally based and so you will learn about the geography of North America or the geography of Latin America. And as part of that there is a big focus on things like capitals. I tell my students if I want to know the capital of all the states I look in an atlas."

Shaw began studying the geography of

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

poverty – those areas where poor people live – and then decided to look at the distribution of people with money.

"The geography of affluence is actually very interesting to me because what you see is that affluence is far more concentrated than the geography of the poor," Shaw said. "The reason is that a lot of times you see that places become poor because people move out of them and the people that can't afford to move get left behind, whereas those affluent people have got all the choices in the world where they want to move to and so they choose to move to very particular places."

This difference in mobility, Shaw said, has a lot to do with job opportunities.

"The South of the U.S. is the poorest region in general but the richest region is the Northeast," Shaw added. "And so if you are going to look for affluence it follows those jobs."

When Shaw teaches facts like these to her students, they discover that geography is not just about capitals of the world.

"They are really confused at first," Shaw said. "There are a lot of students who come to our university and into my classes who come in and they don't know what they want to study. And they get in there and slowly come to recognize that geography at the college level is not the geography that they knew in high school."

Students are also oftentimes surprised,



SIUE Photo

Dr. Wendy Shaw in England

Shaw added, to discover how high-tech geography has become.

"I am often asked what GIS (Geographic Information System) is," Shaw said, "and the best way I can describe it is if you can

that shows all the roads, and then another one that shows the cities, and another one that shows the geology. And you just load transparencies on, every bit of data you can think of for that area, using computers."

Shaw said that her current research involves looking at poverty in Appalachia because "this region has responded to nothing in terms of investments."

"We had the war on poverty that Lyndon B. Johnson launched when he took a trip through the Appalachian region. There has been so much effort put into alleviating poverty and none of it appears to have done any good. But there have been successes in this war on poverty. For instance the elderly now actually have poverty rates that are less than the general population and that is because we have put a lot of effort into alleviating poverty amongst the elderly," Shaw said. While this indicates that we as a society have addressed particular populations in these areas, Shaw said that what we have failed to address is the geographic dimensions to poverty. This failure is fueling Shaw's future research interests.

"I would like to go in and look at what structures, what cultural, what political, economic, or other factors have resulted in this intransigent poverty that we see in these few regions," said Shaw.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.

imagine the old-fashioned transparencies that your teacher used in school and you can imagine a transparency that shows all the vegetation in a particular area. And then you put on top of that another transparency