Beyond Transcribing Headstones: Connecting a Classic Ecology Lab on Human Demography with Community-based Learning

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Background
Cemeteries are excellent places to study human demography. For decades introductory ecology labs have taken students to the local cemetery to collect data, learn about survivorship curves, and look for trends in our history. This lab is used widely because it is investigative, gets students outside, and can be done in all weather conditions.

While the traditional version of this lab requires students to physically visit cemeteries in order to collect data from headstones, virtual cemeteries in the form of online census data and cemetery records have made it less necessary for students to transcribe the data.

Learning Objectives
- Connect survivorship analysis with the human dimension of the data. Reflect on lost history and information when one segment of the population is neglected.
- Connect ecological theory and demography with the experience of community engagement and active citizenship.
- Understand the intersection of humans with the environment through the succession of plant communities in disturbed landscapes.

Week 1: Cemetery Field Work
- Experiencing a cemetery can occur during a normal 3 hour block typically scheduled for a laboratory period or as a special meeting. With multiple sections, we found a large group work day on a Saturday provided community building within our course.
- Students could either participate in physical maintenance (clearing brush and uncovering headstones) or data collection and mapping of headstone information.

Week 2: Data Analysis
- The classic human demography analysis and exploration of hypotheses about human survival can still be performed as described in previous TIEE publications.
- This analysis can be completed in a second lab period, during a classroom period, or as a homework assignment using data available from the visited site, as well as other virtual sources to augment the analysis.

Outcomes and Future Directions
- Over two semesters, students mapped over 500 headstones. With 2,000 uncovered and an estimated 14,000 stones at the site, there is much more work to be done.
- Collaboration with the Geography Department to use a geocollector app for the site.
- Students incorporated social dimensions of human demography and connected analysis of biological data with historical issues in the community.
- High potential for cross-disciplinary connections with other departments and community members.
- Forgotten cemeteries also provide an excellent venue for observations of succession.

Demography through community-based learning:
Evergreen cemetery and adjoining East End cemetery first opened for burials in the late 1890’s. Intended as a premier burial ground for black residents during segregation, these cemeteries are home to pioneering bankers, editors, doctors and educators. By the mid-twentieth century however, mismanagement, lack of funding and neglect left these cemeteries overgrown and vandalized. Now volunteers work to restore dignity to the site, clearing brush and trash, uncovering the past one headstone at a time.

Suggested Readings

Acknowledgements
Special thanks to John Shuck, Brian Palmer, and Erin Holloway Palmer for sharing their stories and inspiring us to do more. We are grateful for the GIS expertise of Kim Brown and Taylor Holden at the UR Spatial Analysis Lab and the UR Center for Civic Engagement and UR Downtown for supporting this work.