During my eight weeks at Bowdoin this summer, I was fortunate enough to work with Professor Ericka Albaugh as a Gibbons fellow. During my fellowship, I helped Prof. Albaugh design and construct language maps for specific African countries. With the help of Jennifer Snow and Eileen Johnson, I used the computer program ArcGIS to make these maps. The goal of the work was to track language spread across certain regions of Africa, and later, to determine why certain languages spread while others did not. While the research may have been preliminary, it was certainly a gratifying and stimulating eight weeks at Bowdoin.

When looking back at my research for Prof. Albaugh, I think of doing it in two parts. The first centered on the gathering of information about countries’ languages. For example, when looking at language spread for Nigeria, along with the name of each language, it is helpful to know how many people speak it, whether that population is increasing or decreasing in number, what region of the country it is spoken in, the contexts in which it is used, or if it is taught in school or used in radio programs. To find this information, I used the web version of Ethnologue: Languages of the World. I copied whatever data I could find for each language into an Excel spreadsheet, and then color-coded each row to further help us distinguish certain trends. As I quickly found, some countries had much more detailed data on their native (and foreign) languages spoken than did others. Regardless, whatever viable information Ethnologue had, was copied into the spreadsheets.

The second half of my work was the map-building phase. Using a scanned image of a language map from the hardcopy of Ethnologue, the information I gathered from the Internet, and ArcGIS, I was able to create our new language maps. First, I traced the language regions from the scanned image onto GIS. Once a region was complete, I could then embed the data from the spreadsheets to help track language spread. I continued to do this until the country or portion of the country I was working on was complete. After many of these smaller maps had been completed, I was able to combine them into larger regional maps so we could analyze bigger linguistic trends and shifts.

Though we were not able to dig too deeply as to why certain languages survived while others did not, Prof. Albaugh and I did have a few discussions on why this might happen. Geographical boundaries such as mountain ranges or large bodies of water might impact how and in what direction certain languages spread. A trade route passing through a certain region can also determine a language’s growth or lack thereof. Even though we did not have the time to answer all of the questions, I truly enjoyed my time working with Prof. Albaugh at Bowdoin this summer and am very grateful to have been a Gibbons summer fellow.

Prof. Ericka Albaugh

Gibbons Fellowship