

PAN AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY
CARTOGRAPHIC COMMISSION
REPORT OF THE TWENTY-FIRST GEOGRAPHIC NAMES COURSE
José Joaquín Hungría Morell Geographic Names Course
Madrid, Spain
19 October – 30 October 2009

The José Joaquín Hungría Morell Geographic Names Course, offered under the auspices of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), was held in Madrid, Spain from 19 October through 30 October 2009. The Instituto Geográfico Nacional served as host and provided excellent training facilities and administrative support. The course is, by design, held in a member State of PAIGH, but this year by special request to and dispensation from the Office of the Secretary General, the course was held in the PAIGH observer State of Spain.

The importance of applied toponymy is evident worldwide, and has been noted to be essential in local, regional, and national planning as well as emergency response and preparedness, national security, environmental analysis, and a variety of similar applications. In short, standardization of geographic names is a major factor in support of a nation's spatial data infrastructure. The two-week course is designed to provide an introduction and basis for national standardization of geographic names and a program of applied toponymy. The first week is predominately lecture and addresses various aspects of applied toponymy, and concentrates heavily upon all requirements involved in establishing a program of national standardization, while exploring conventional and alternate methods of achieving this goal. A comprehensive field exercise offers students the opportunity of actual data gathering, processing, and analyzing in accordance with established toponymic field procedures. The second week of the course is devoted to a workshop in automated data processing where the student designs databases and files, as well as acquires the ability to retrieve and analyze toponymic data in a microprocessing environment. Finally, there is an exercise where a names staff interacts with a national names authority in applying principles and policies of standardization.

The twenty-first course was comprised of 18 students from Spain as well as three students respectively from Brazil, Panama, and Ecuador. As requested, and as desired, the students represented a mixture from the various agencies of the National government, the autonomous States, and also included students from the academic community. This version of the course was altered somewhat in some modules and significantly in some modules because it was clear that a high level of progress in Spain has been achieved. Specifically, a national committee for names standardization had been established in 2002 and is functioning. Further, at least four of the autonomous States are in various stages of developing or have developed policies regarding the standardization of geographic names in their respective States. The level of expertise and understanding regarding automation in general, and specifically database design and data manipulation was in every case at a high level of development and comprehension.

The Working Group reports that the full complement of the teaching team was not available for this course. The member from Honduras was not able to participate this year because of a political situation. Without question this impacted the presentation of the course. The two instructors who were present are qualified fully to present the course, but the analytical abilities, insightful means of problem-solving, smooth and professional delivery of lectures, highly developed skills of field investigation, and a host of additional professional attributes and skills of Sr. Rivera were sorely missed by the team.

The module where development of principles, policies, and procedures of standardization is introduced was altered to analyze, discuss, and refine the policies already developed at the national level in Spain. There were more than 25 presentations and papers delivered by experts from national and State governments as well as representatives from the academic community engaged in formal agreements for database design and development with both the national government and the various State governments. The course offered a convenient means for all to review and contrast the work of these individuals and groups as it applies to the overall goal of national standardization and development and population of a national geographic names database (in its infancy of populating presently), and provide a convenient forum for meaningful analysis and suggestions from other points of view.

The course and its presence served to facilitate further the coordination of these efforts, and provided a forum and platform for meaningful dialog where the instructors served as advisors and facilitators. The Instituto Geográfico Nacional leads a consortium of national and State agencies in implementing the national geographic names standardization program and a national geographic names database with all relevant national and State organizations represented on the national committee whose role presently is one of non-binding arbitration although this could change as policies and procedures become more developed and tested. Much time in the course was devoted to analyses regarding existing policies as to how they function, and whether the present policies are effective, and whether additional policies are required for situations not yet addressed. The same was accomplished for the autonomous States, and the facilitated discussions and exchanges were highly beneficial to all.

Also, the automation workshop was accelerated to be commensurate with the overall more advanced level of the students regarding database design and associated functions. Some functionality not normally presented was discussed. In fact, little traditional training was required as the students were already at a satisfactory level so that the exercises could be launched almost immediately allowing additional time for more thorough analysis of the nature of the questions in the exercises as well as a discussion regarding the reasons behind many of the more advanced questions.

Aspects of the internet as it applies to geographic names research were explored thoroughly and much time was devoted to the web-based maintenance program for geographic names in the United States (at the U.S. Geological Survey for the official

national names database in the United States). As indicated, the mechanism and polices are in place nationally and throughout regional Spain, but maintenance has not been implemented or even developed in many cases. In fact, the students (representing their respective organizations) are just beginning this all important process, and the process of development and implementation in the United States was examined and dissected thoroughly providing insight as well as a sound basis for discussion and exchange. This was accomplished in detail, and the timing was just so.

As ever, while the course has evolved into a well-structured set of seven inter-related modules, it continues to be an excellent forum for sharing common problems and defining solutions. Importantly, differences and commonalities between and among various agencies were discussed and solutions offered. The team of two instructors (in this case two, see above reference) from the USA & Mexico (originally) – the instructor from Honduras was absent - are well versed in team teaching, and the course, recognized by the United Nations Geographic Names Training Committee, is as evident in this case, easily altered to address specific advanced needs and requirements. Only the linguistic module remained introductory; all others were elevated beyond the introductory level. Even though some material was altered to be considerably more than introductory, it remains clear there is need for more time specifically in one or more particular modules.

The changing role of the names layer in a national spatial data environment, and the increasing requirements for digital mapping, both general and thematic were examined, discussed, and even debated. While the students were at an advanced level in every way, techniques of collecting data, extant and otherwise, were examined thoroughly where various techniques, some known and some not known, were examined with special emphasis on source type and value.

As usual, conclusions indicate that there is a high level of interest in this course and it is well received. There is a high degree of enthusiasm throughout Spain and its autonomous States for development and implementation of programs of standardization nationally, and within the States. The enthusiasm includes work toward a carefully designed national and regional networked data system for geographic names. It was discussed on several occasions and at various levels that a second, more advanced course is needed and required where the focus would be on success of policy development, but more particularly on analysis of user needs and development and implementation of maintenance programs. Certainly, it is apparent that the course achieves its stated goals and should be continued.

Respectfully submitted,
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