

# DNA analysis unlocks students' pasts

January 31 2008

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For most of her life, Georgia State doctoral student Erin Harper thought of herself as African-American with French ancestry.

But through a DNA analysis project in her biopsychology class last spring, Harper learned her ancestors traveled out of east Africa, through Asia and over the Bering land bridge to what is now North America, a lineage often carried by Eskimos.

“My family and I were in disbelief, and kind of amused,” Harper said. “We were like, ‘Eskimos, what?’ But it made me want to know more and dig even deeper into my ancestry.”

Harper is not alone. Many Georgia State students who participated in the project had similar reactions when they received answers to such basic human questions as, “Who am I?” and “How did I get to where I am today?”

Next week, biopsychology professor Scott Decker will invite a new class of students to participate in the project and learn about their collective ancestry. The exercise not only teaches students the complexities of DNA, evolution and human migration, but it also can change their perspective on race, Decker says.

“What this project says is, ‘Race doesn’t exist,’” he said. “Any observable differences between us are climatic adaptations. We all have the same emotions, thoughts and decision-making processes.”

Using a DNA collection kit, Decker's students will scrape their cheek cells and send samples to be compared against the largest DNA database studying human migration ever assembled.

Launched in 2005, National Geographic and IBM are collecting and analyzing DNA from people across the globe for their Genographic Project, which attempts to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of how the human species migrated out of Africa to populate the planet.

Once students get their results and learn their genetic journey, they will research the paths their ancestors took and reflect on how it compares to what they know about their personal histories. The students' DNA will be voluntarily submitted to the Genographic Project, adding another piece to the puzzle of human migration. Decker will also use his students' reactions in his research on how genetic results impact views of race.

“By giving students this information – tangible evidence – it changes their attitudes on diversity,” Decker said. “It brings history to life.”

Source: Georgia State University

Citation: DNA analysis unlocks students' pasts (2008, January 31) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-01-dna-analysis-students.html>

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