



Seth Appiah-Opoku (1965-Present)

Associate Professor, Department of
Geography

University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa

"There's no other way to touch so many hearts than to teach." Seth Appiah-Opoku, 2005.

Overview

Seth Appiah-Opoku is an associate professor of geography at the University of Alabama where he teaches environmental management, planning, and land use regulation at both the undergraduate and graduate level. His research interests include urban and regional planning, environmental planning, and Africa. In 2005, he passed the American Institute of Certified Planners exam, joining only about 13,400 other certified planners in the U.S. He also published his first book in 2005 titled *The Need for Indigenous Knowledge in Environment Impact Assessment: The Case of Ghana*. He recently edited a book titled *Environmental Land Use Planning*. Appiah-Opoku has served on the international editorial board of the journal *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* since 2003, an opportunity that gained him international recognition. He has also received numerous awards, including the Young Canadian Researcher's award from the International Development Research Center (Ottawa, Ontario); a Rural Research Development Award from the University of Guelph; and academic merit awards from both the University of Waterloo and Ryerson Polytechnic University. In addition to his current duties as teacher and researcher, Appiah-Opoku serves on the mediation committee at the University of Alabama, where he advises university officials on how to resolve high-level internal conflicts. Some of his recent publications include:

- Moses, T., Steven, J., and Appiah-Opoku, S. (2014). System User Involvement in Sustainable Urban Transport Decision-making. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Engineering and Applied Sciences*. 5:145-150.
- Jones, S., Tefe, M., and Appiah-Opoku, S. (2013). Proposed Framework for Sustainability Screening of Urban Transport Projects in Developing Countries: A Case Study of Accra, Ghana. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*. 49: 21-34.
- Appiah-Opoku, S., and Bryan, C.H. (2013). Environmental Assessment Follow-up in Ghana: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Environmental Impact Assessment Review*.

Early Life and Career

Seth Appiah-Opoku was born in Ghana on December 30, 1965 and is one of six children born to Sinclair and Akua Asaama Appiah-Opoku. His father was an architect who owned his own firm. Influenced by his father's career path, Appiah-Opoku decided to pursue a degree in planning. He received his Bachelor's degree in urban and regional planning in 1990 at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto, Ontario. He then attended the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, where he received a master's degree in Rural Planning and International Development in 1992.

Appiah-Opoku became interested in an environmental career path during his undergraduate studies, when he realized the impact of environmental considerations on planning and policy decisions. "Humans have been degrading the environment for many years, and we're realizing that we need to reverse that trend," Appiah-Opoku says. He realized that planners can be positive agents for environmental change, and decided to focus his doctoral studies on environmental planning.

Appiah-Opoku obtained a Ph.D. in Environmental Planning from the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, in 1997. He was then hired as an instructor at the University of Northern British Columbia, where he taught classes in environmental planning, air pollution, hazardous waste management, and gender and the environment. In 1998 he moved to the University of Vermont, where he added courses in international environmental issues, indigenous ecological knowledge, and environmental awareness. In 1999, he began directing a summer abroad course in Ghana. The course, which Appiah-Opoku still teaches at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, examines how culture impacts the environment and environmental discourse, and has proved very successful. He is currently an associate professor at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, where he teaches environmental management, planning, and land use regulation at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

Mentoring

Appiah-Opoku credits his success in academia to "the basics": hard work, publishing outstanding research, being an excellent teacher, and engaging in service to help his students, his community, and the world at large. He has benefited from the inspiration and guidance of several mentors. Appiah-Opoku particularly notes one undergraduate professor at Ryerson, whose course on environmental impact assessment sparked in him a realization of the urgent need for new and innovative methods of protecting the environment. Appiah-Opoku also cites his graduate advisor for making him aware of his full potential. He says that advisor told him he could go as far in his career as he was willing to work for, a principle Appiah-Opoku applies to this day.

Following in the footsteps of his mentors, Appiah-Opoku, in turn, encourages his students. He endeavors to give them direction, and strongly urges them to recognize potential problems and learn how to navigate around them. Experience has taught him that many students have difficulty, because they lack effective time and financial management skills. Appiah-Opoku says these are problems that students can overcome with proactive strategies, personalized organization skills, and a good budgeting system. Appiah-Opoku shares anecdotes of his life as a student to serve as examples of how school, work, and other pressures can be effectively managed.

Many of those anecdotes come from Appiah-Opoku's days as an undergraduate student at the Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto, when he attended classes during the day and worked at night to finance his education. Through this experience, Appiah-Opoku says he remained committed to pursuing a career in the environmental field. As a student, he came to believe his work could have a positive impact on the world; he says environmental planners are "missionaries who are in a position to spread the gospel about the need to conserve and protect the environment." It is for this reason that he also relishes his position as a professor. "There's no other way to touch so many hearts than to teach," he says.

Contributions

Appiah-Opoku's career accomplishments are numerous. In 2005, he passed the American Institute of Certified Planners exam, joining only about 13,400 other certified planners in the U.S. He also published his first book in 2005 titled *The Need for Indigenous Knowledge in Environment Impact Assessment: The Case of Ghana*. He recently edited a book titled *Environmental Land Use Planning*(2012). Published by INTECH, this book brings together contributions from leading environmental scholars around the globe including Canada, USA, China, Jordan, Nigeria, Germany, Serbia, Venezuela, and Brazil. Appiah-Opoku has served on the international editorial board of the journal *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* since 2003, an opportunity that gained him international recognition. He has also received numerous awards, including the Young Canadian Researcher's award from the International Development Research Center (Ottawa, Ontario); a Rural Research Development Award from the University of Guelph; and academic merit awards from both the University of Waterloo and Ryerson Polytechnic University.

In addition to his current duties as teacher and researcher, Appiah-Opoku serves on the mediation committee at the University of Alabama, where he advises university officials on how to resolve high-level internal conflicts. When advising students of color, Appiah-Opoku urges them to have self-confidence, discipline, organizational skills, and, most importantly, a strong work ethic. In his own words: "Don't be discouraged by obstacles that may come your way. Face your problems and keep going forward."

For More Information

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This interview was conducted in 2015.