Preparing for Big Data Careers

Interview with Robert McGrath, Everett B. Sackett Associate Professor and Director for Graduate Programs in Analytics at University of New Hampshire

What SAS® applications have you used in the past, and which applications are you currently using in the classroom?

Base SAS® is primarily what we use for undergraduates, however the analytics program (masters level) will use SAS® Visual Analytics, SAS® Enterprise Miner™ and SAS® Text Miner at minimum.

Why do you choose to teach with SAS?

It's the standard, and it's powerful. The integration of tools allows for scalable analysis at a number of levels. Plus, having certifications means our students will be well sought after.

What does the analytics skills gap mean to you? How do you think students benefit from learning about analytics and SAS?

The gap is less about stats and more about insights. Analytics is a nascent field that is highly applied, highly interdisciplinary and requires a unique ability to understand data. It also requires you have a high intellectual curiosity and be able to communicate effectively given your audience. The SAS tools lend well to each of those. Students can program on a large scale, data mine, explore, integrate, but also create some very cool "tell the story" and applied end user interfaces through SAS Visual Analytics.

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What's the coolest or most impactful thing you've done using analytics? Perhaps an example you use in your class?

I think the all-payer health insurance claims work the institute for health policy has done really showcases why a tool like SAS Visual Analytics is so important. It takes an amorphous issue like delivering health care, shows its size and scope (and importance) but then presents the real data issues of using data collected for paying a bill for establishing cost and quality benchmarks. Then comes the task of giving providers and stakeholders something useful and actionable, not simply 700 pages of static reports. SAS Visual Analytics helps that happen and anyone in the room immediately gets the impact, not to mention starts asking more questions. That's when you know you've hit your mark.

What advice would you give students or adult learners interested in pursuing an analytics career?

Do it if you love data and have a natural curiosity. Don't do it for the paycheck (although it's a nice one these days). Also, pick a program that is highly immersive with industry partners. There are no PhDs of Data Science in Universities (yet). It's happening in industry. Make sure the program(s) you pick offer that connection. Also, get certifications. The more you can do, the more attractive you will be across industries.