LAFAYETTE, LA. - Rough figures show that a New Orleans resident is 2.6 times more likely to die of cancer than a resident of Lafayette Parish. Why? What other factors influence cancer mortality?

With a grant of $6,000 from the Louisiana Board of Regents, a group of University of Southwestern Louisiana researchers will examine closely the spatial and temporal patterns of cancer mortality in Louisiana.

The study team members are Drs. Dennis Ehrhardt, David Johnson and Henry Bullamore, all of the USL department of geography and planning.

They will proceed in two phases. The first will describe how the incidence of cancer varies by parish within the state. The second phase will attempt to correlate social, economic and environmental factors with cancer incidence.

Within Phase II, the USL researchers will try to correlate cancer incidence with such environmental factors as hazardous waste sites, air or water pollution, climate, soil types, water sources, and geographical region.

At the parish level, they will also try to associate with cancer incidence such economic factors as crop types, fishing industries, petrochemical industry employment, poverty, use of pesticides, level of urbanization, and industrial expansion.

The study team will also seek patterns of cancer mortality in such social factors as ethnic background, educational level, alcoholism, tobacco use, availability of health care facilities, and population growth. Oddly enough, even religion will be considered: two studies have shown that Utah Mormons, for example, have a low incidence of cancer, probably due to their environmental conditions and lifestyle.

Finally, the USL researchers will consider the total impact of environmental, economic and social variables on regional incidence of cancer. At this stage, they should be able to make statements about which factors affect an uncommonly high (or low) incidence of cancer in a particular parish.

They will then map cancer mortality by parish for each year since 1950. This should identify any parish with a particularly high incidence of cancer. These maps should also identify areas where specific types of cancer are increasing or decreasing, and show any correlation between certain types of cancer and geographical or temporal factors.

The Board of Regents grant is part of a $409,000 statewide distribution of money to Louisiana universities, as part of the Regents Research and Development Program. USL also won a grant of $25,000 for crawfish research.