

Community Engagement Fellows Reflection

Sustainable Development and Implementation of an Energy Ambassadors Program

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I joined the 2017-2018 Community Engagement Fellows program to dedicate time and space to the long-term planning and development of a research + outreach initiative, the Energy Ambassadors (EA) program. In its current incarnation, the EA program supports a cohort of 4-5 WWU undergraduates (EAs) to pursue a summer research project related to energy systems. Weekly meetings over the summer afford the EAs opportunities to explain their research goals and progress to one another and to explore how they would communicate these ideas to a wider audience. By the end of the summer, in addition to their research accomplishments, the EAs have also prepared educational outreach materials linking their research to one or more essential aspects of energy literacy, e.g. where our electricity comes from, energy vs power, or the impacts of energy resource utilization on anthropogenic climate change. The program culminates with one or more EA outreach visits to a high school in the region.

The first year of the EA program was supported by a one-time gift to the Institute for Energy Studies. My central goal upon entering the CE Fellows program was to explore and identify ways to sustain the program, especially in terms of funding and K-12 educational partner relationship-building. During my year with the CE Fellows, I was fortunate to secure multiple years of additional financial support for the initiative through a combination of internal funding by the Institute for Energy Studies and external funding from the Research Corporation for Science Advancement as part of a Cottrell Scholar Award. My focus during CE Fellows meetings therefore shifted toward strategies for meaningful engagement with host partners for the energy literacy outreach aspect of the program.

What I had not fully appreciated at the outset of my year with CE Fellows was how strongly the insights and experiences of the other CE Fellows in my cohort would challenge and inspire the direction of my planning. Their depth of combined experience in the community, and especially their existing relationships with education professionals in the community, were instrumental in helping me identify ways to involve education partners in the planning of the outreach component of the EA program to give them an equal voice in its development and to ensure the program is mutually beneficial for all participants. Others in my cohort helped open my eyes to possibilities for outreach partners beyond the realm of K-12 education and helped me more fully appreciate how involving these partners in the initial stages of the planning process – while minimizing the associated administrative burden on them – could help make the engagement more meaningful on all sides.

Learning first-hand about the variety and richness of initiatives in development by the other CE Fellows, I came away from this year's discussions with several ideas for improving my practice

as a teacher-scholar and, perhaps more importantly, a sense that the barriers to implementing these changes are not as significant as I would have assumed. At the beginning of the program, I perceived two major barriers to community-interfacing projects: the limited mentoring available for this kind of work and the modest size of my professional network in the community. With CE Fellows as peer mentors for community engagement, the program has helped transform these perceived barriers into bridges.