Perspective from a First ESSE Meeting

An interview with Rebecca Dodge, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA by Sabra Lee

Gathering ideas and building partnerships to grow new and better programs

(Rebecca participated in her first ESSE meeting at the University of Alaska in August, 2005)

How did you hear about ESSE?
I believe that I got hooked up with it through Anupma Prakash after I visited the University of Alaska Fairbanks two years ago for an AmericaView meeting. I went to do a visit there before the meeting and met with students and faculty. Anupma told me about ESSE21 and that she was part of it, and I think she helped get me on the listserve. I got on and started responding to people's posts. At some point there was a meeting announcement and I said I wanted to come. ESSE21 agreed to support me and pay for my room and food. I paid for my trip.

What drew you to the ESSE21 the annual meeting?
I wanted to know more about Earth System Science Education programs at other universities. We have an ES education degree in our department of geosciences but we do not have an ESS program. So I was interested in possibly starting one here. I really had in mind replacing these environmental undergraduate programs that are interdisciplinary degrees. One is environmental sciences and the other environmental studies. I have been frustrated [with these programs] and wanted to upgrade our ES education and was looking for a network of people already doing this. My expectations were more than met.

What did you get out of the meeting?

I was very interested to see that there are people involved in teacher education who are part of ESSE21. And I was not sure that would be the case. I was also just fascinated by the different disciplines represented, such as a department of chemistry or physics, or sociology—there are so many different disciplines actually involved. And different universities have their own take on how to teach Earth system science, and there is something to be learned from all of them. I was just blown away by the quality of the presentations and the work that had been done.

Some of the programs are integrating the human impacts very effectively. That is something I try to do. I want now to go back to the ESSE21 website and to contact people from different universities, especially those developing laboratory activities, since we're constantly trying to upgrade our lab offerings. I think I will be able to get some really good help from people I met, like April Ulery from New Mexico State University. I think she will have lab exercises and approaches that will be extremely useful for me.

And of course Anupma Prakash is a great model, with the work she is doing, the outreach she is involved in. She introduced us to the workshop from Cricketsat, which I took. I am also very interested in people doing education outreach to K-12 teachers. I intend to mine the ESSE21 website and reintroduce myself to people and ask them specific questions. Now they won't be strangers to me and it won't be a cold call.

I actually have also thought of ESS as something you would find in an Earth science or biology department, not necessarily physics or chemistry. Now I know that is not true, which empowers me to bring more people to the table here at my university. Their response may be "I never heard of ESS," but thanks to my involvement with ESSE21, I can now point, say, to a physicist who is deeply involved with ESS. Being able to invoke such people will give me more credibility when I talk with faculty and administrators at my own institution.

I have to play this from two directions—from the science teacher side as well as from the environmental science and environmental studies side, people who will go into the field to work rather than teaching about it.

I have already talked with people here in the geography department since I came back and have lined up a physical geographer and one human geographer [whose specialty is urban geography and poverty and who works with environmental justice issues] who think it sounds like a great idea to fold the undergraduate interdisciplinary environmental degrees into a single ESS degree.

In addition I will approach the chemistry and geology professors here who are degree advisors for the environmental degree programs. Those in charge are in the political science program and the sociology department, and they take environmental study courses and typically many of those are cross-listed, say as a biology class or a chemistry class or a geology class. But I know the chemistry professor and the geologist will love it. I don't know about the sociologist and political scientists. My approach is going to be to try to bring together resources to improve both the environmental science and environmental studies degree programs, and to bring together faculty to write grants. I will approach this as improving both programs by bringing them into an ESS program. I have all of the ESSE21 programs to show them.

CricketSat
http://www.vtspacegrant.org/cricketsat.htm

ESSE21 Alaska Meeting, August, 2005
http://esse21.usra.edu/ESSE21/home_meetings2005.html