

How Our ESS Courses Were Approved in Less than 30 Minutes!

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There was an unexpected alignment of the planets and stars. That must be the explanation of how we received both department and institutional support for our ESSE proposal in 30 minutes.

When David Baker, Austin College associate professor of physics, saw the announcement for the ESSE proposal, he thought that the proposal seemed to be a perfect fit for Austin College's needs. The science division was poised for interdisciplinary work both through the environmental studies program and through an upgraded student graduation requirement of one on-campus science course with lab. Another required core course, *The Heritage of Western Culture—Science and*

Society, had recently been revised to accommodate smaller class sizes and stronger student involvement. Austin College had a need for new, exciting science courses that also addressed societal impacts. There seemed to be a natural match with potential ESS courses and the objectives of the proposal.

David shared these ideas with his colleagues, an ecologist and a biologist, who agreed to participate in the proposal. All three of them recognized the importance of interactions among different spheres on Earth and the benefits of Earth system science in the undergraduate curriculum. After a mere 15-minute meeting with the Dean of Sciences (which included an orientation to the call for proposals), the stage was set for a meeting with the Dean of Academic Affairs. Since the proposal called for commitment from the college for matching funds and continuing support for courses, this meeting with the college administrator was essential. David sent a brief outline of his ideas along with the purpose of the meeting to the Dean of Academic Affairs.



Another 15-minute meeting. The Dean was excited about the idea. The college administration was prepared to support the new course offerings, committing to these courses beyond the two-year requirement of the grant and agreeing to match funds. According to David, "It wasn't a hard sell. There was no need to convince. It was a nice fit."

So how does a process like this occur in 30 minutes? A small institution has to take advantage of its strengths. The key to success is matching the interests of the faculty with those of the institution at the beginning of the process. Both faculty and the administration were on board prior to writing the grant proposal. After the grant was awarded, official course approval was a mere formality. According to David, "The proposal was ambitious, including four new courses, two revised courses, a lecture series, a large-screen plasma display in the lobby and two teacher workshops. It didn't seem overly ambitious because we had the support of the administration. We knew we could do it." So maybe it was not an alignment of the planets that made this happen, but rather the critical alignment of interdisciplinary Earth System Science Education and the institutional goals of Austin College.

ESS at Austin College

http://esse21.usra.edu/ESSE21/esse21_austin.html