

MES Quarterly Update

Excerpts from the MESsages Blog

Winter 2015

blogs.evergreen.edu/messages

Letter from the Director

Last week thirty-five anxious students gathered for the first thesis workshop of winter quarter to strategize solutions to their thesis challenges. As a new director teaching this class for the first time, I was working through my own anxieties. Each student is developing and researching a unique research question, with its own constellation of existing scholarship, methods for data collection and analysis, and practical challenges. I'm amazed at the range of topics. Consider the research questions of my own thesis students: Can you use remote sensing to locate potential sites of historic logging camps in Capitol Forest? What is the relationship between views of evolution and environmental attitudes among Christian clergy? How do so-called "use it or lose it" water policies effect irrigation practices? What motivates volunteers to participate in citizen science research? What was the environmental impact of the Olympia Brewing Company during its formative years? Of course, this diversity makes for rich conversations. But it also presents a teaching challenge: How do I create assignments and activities that are truly meaningful and useful across such a broad range of topics, data, and methods? After that first class, I had a new appreciation for the importance of making thesis work, which at certain times is inevitably and painfully solitary, a communal enterprise. Hopefully, each student will gain perspective and strength by working alongside others in this common journey.

In six months, this cohort will be the 30th class of MES graduates. Last summer a small group of MES alumni, faculty, and students began talking about how to celebrate this anniversary. We wanted a festive day that allowed alumni to reconnect with old friends and build new connections while commemorating the legacy of MES graduates who are making valuable contributions on diverse environmental and social issues through a more focused event.

As it turns out, creating a program for the 30th anniversary celebration poses a similar kind of challenge as teaching the thesis workshop. Our "common"

history is also many individual stories. Under the general theme of "Telling the MES Story" we hope to capture both unique individual stories and common experiences and themes. Fortunately, Evergreen undergraduates have been working hard during the past year to collect some of these

stories. During the past year, Karen Gaul (MES faculty 06/07) has taught two academic programs where students interviewed many MES alumni that are documented in audio and video recordings. They transcribed the interviews and created posters for each alumnus. As part of the 30th anniversary celebration, these students will share their work. We will also have a panel of MES directors and alumni discuss the major environmental and social challenges that, over the past 30 years, have attracted students to the program and motivated their studies. We will also hear stories that reflect how the experience of being an MES student has changed over the years.

This program is just one event that will take place over the long weekend of activities. We start on Thursday, April 23, with the 25th Rachel Carson Forum, which is organized by current MES students. Friday evening is the Olympia Arts Walk and the Luminary Procession. Saturday is the 21st Procession of the Species. This annual event, developed by Eli Sterling (MES 1991), weaves together art, conservation, and community.

Since I began teaching in the MES program, I've been impressed by the number of alumni who are doing important work on environmental and social issues in our state. Most express deep appreciation for their MES education and many stay involved by sponsoring internships. We hope you'll join us in April to celebrate this collective accomplishment.



Kevin Francis, Director of the Graduate Program on the Environment

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AASHE 2014 Conference & Olympia to Portland Bike Ride

By Ryan Hobbs, 1st Year MES Student

As I watched the sun's light begin to peak above the trees surrounding Chambers Lake, my mind was riddled with anxiety. On my lap sat the checklist for the two-day bike journey down to Portland, Oregon. I had triple-checked my bags the night before and as dawn began to break, I was doing it again to alleviate my anxiousness. Soon enough the bodies began to trickle in, all nine of them. The ten of us were variously assembling our gear and making last-minute adjustments before heading out on the first leg of our ride to the 2014 Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) Conference. After some quick gear checks and lots of pictures eight of us mounted our trusty two-wheeled steeds and began down the trail. Two more in a support vehicle headed out down the road.

The fog was ever present and the leaves carpeted the pavement. Fast forward 70-miles down trails, city streets, two-lane highways through the back country, a few challenging hills, with the same song on repeat in my mind (King Crimson's Starless), we arrived at the Toutle River Resort in Castle Rock, Washington. The weather had cooperated nearly the entire day and the rain did not join us until that night. Damage report for the group: a bent fender and several flats, nothing too bad. We celebrated with pizza and sleep, though three of us could not resist soaking our bones in the hot tub. Rain that had visited us towards the end of the ride continued on through the night and we planned on a wet second day.

A most pleasant scent was creeping up the stairs the following morning and I woke up to find a delicious homemade quiche waiting for me. A member of our support team was up early that morning making sure we had a hearty meal to provide us the energy we would need on the final 65-miles of our trip. We set off with the clouds breaking way to make room for the sun. This day would find us alongside busy highways and crossing the Lewis and Clark bridge into Oregon. After about 10-minutes of riding in Oregon the rain started. It did not prove to be a deterrent and after about 30-miles of riding we found ourselves eating lunch in the living room of the MES Assistant Director's parent's house (she was riding down with us).

As I was finishing up lunch, I realized the weather was starting to rear an ugly face. Wind gusts and sideways rain started to pummel the pavement. After some discussion and repairs, a staff member taxied the remaining riders into Portland.

Finally in Portland, we explored the town before heading to hear the keynote speaker, Annie Leonard, Sunday evening. The AASHE phone app was a life saver as the presentation offerings were baffling in quantity. It was interesting to see how other schools were utilizing learning outcomes and cross disciplinary approaches to teach sustainability concepts, how others were banning water bottles (presented by one of the riders), and ways in which GIS could be used to manage sustainability in higher education. The last presentation of the day stood out to me to be the most interesting. It was an avant-garde music & video performance called The Lyrebird, which sought to challenge listeners to think about the confrontations of humans and the natural world. Tuesday I caught several more sessions including a documentary and discussion on urban farming, indigenous practices for sustainability, and a case I hope to tackle at Evergreen, mitigating bird strikes on campus.

The entire train ride home I reflected on the challenges we faced on our ride, how we worked together for a common goal, and pushed each other to succeed. I barely knew any of these people before going on the ride but I have now forged some strong connections and what I witnessed at AASHE was quite similar. Here were thousands of people with an array of disciplines working together and connecting for a common goal. To see this event taking place and knowing that so much energy and passion is being put in to help guide the futures is very promising. AASHE is a hopeful sign that we are using our compassion, intelligence, technology, and wealth to create the path of meaningfulness and abundance for us all to follow.



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