## Director's Note

## By Kevin Francis

This month we welcomed 30 prospective students to our annual Admitted Student Day. One highlight was a panel featuring recent alumni—Dennis Buckingham, Rhianna Hruska, and Teal Waterstrat—who talked about how their MES education and community supported their careers in unforeseen ways. Each speaker discussed the value of problem solving through an interdisciplinary lens, collaborating with diverse organizations, and developing strong bonds within their MES cohort. For our newsletter this spring, MES Assistant Director, Andrea Martin, interviewed two alumni—**Rachel Jamison** and **Tyrus Smith**—about their MES experience and subsequent careers.

**Our accomplished and engaged alumni are a key strength of the MES program.** They recommend prospective students, provide internships, and advise current students and recent alumni. We are able to connect students with a variety of alumni who have offered their services as mentors in a range of environmental fields. We also suspect there are numerous alumni interested in fulfilling such mentorship roles to continue supporting student success and help others achieve their career goals. **If you would like to make sure you are on the list to be a future mentor, please contact Andrea Martin at** [**martina@evergreen.edu**](mailto:martina@evergreen.edu)**.**

We are excited about two new faculty that will be joining the MES core faculty next year. **Tyrus Smith** will help our students understand the many dimensions of creating and implementing environmental policy, with special focus on how such processes can address or reinforce existing inequities. **E. J. Zita** brings expertise in solar astronomy, climate change, and energy to help students understand the physical science behind environmental issues. Zita also serves as an Olympia Port Commissioner and thus brings valuable first-hand insight into environmental management and politics.

## The Importance of the Thesis: Catching Up with Rachael Jamison, MES 2003

Rachael Jamison is the Planning, Public Works and Environmental Director at the Port of Olympia. In this role, she oversees all environmental management, sustainability reporting, regulatory environmental site assessments, and compliance and capital investments. Beyond all that, she also directs the Engineering department at the Port on infrastructure projects, remediation projects (e.g. Budd Inlet), and the City of Olympia’s sea level rise plan.

Rachael is a twice over Greener, completing her BS with an emphasis in microbiology in 1998, and her MES in 2003. Her thesis research – one of the parts of her MES career she remembers best – looked at women in certified organic farming programs. Rachael describes the thesis process as “miserably hard but worth it.” In her study, she used a feminist empiricist theoretical framework to analyze Washington state data about women in certified organic farming. She used a mixed methods approach, implementing both statistical tests and qualitative observations, compiling many interviews and stories of the women and work she researched. Her study concluded that, at that time, female organic farm operators “employ practices and make production choices more compatible with the organic food movement than do male participants…female participants in organic agriculture exemplify the philosophy that initiated the movement and can contribute to the integration of these principles into a larger-scale industry.”  (Jamison 2003).

Rachael worked full time at the Washington State Department of Agriculture when she started the MES program at Evergreen. She was also a full-time single mom, and because she is a self-described “nerd”, decided she was ready for another degree. Since completing her MES, Rachael has held a variety of environmental roles in southwest Washington. After leaving the Department of Agriculture, she worked in green building sector development at the Washington Department of Ecology, and then for the Department of Natural Resources on climate change adaptation and renewable energy programs. She then took a break from the public sector and moved into sustainability management at Weyerhauser, based in Federal Way, WA. Rachael feels strongly that more environmental leaders should consider the private sector, an area where she was able to implement a variety of high-impact sustainability initiatives. Her current work at the Port is “rounding out” her career in environmental management and sustainability. It continues to compliment her work in up-and-coming environmental fields like organic farming and sustainable operations.

Rachael’s advice to current MES students who may be struggling to tailor their degree or focus their thesis topic, is to study what you love, not what you think will get you a job. While it might sound cliché, she believes is this approach insures that students will pursue and accept jobs that truly interest them. She also added that **as a person who hires people, “I care less about the specifics of what you studied and more that you’ve completed something significant, that you have follow through.”** Reflecting on her time in MES, one of the biggest benefits of the program for Rachael has been the relationships she built within her cohort, and within the greater environmental community. When partnering and collaborating with others at different agencies or organizations, she is often working with fellow MES alumni, and that initial area of similarity can act as a bridge to building new partnerships and opportunities. **Her thesis taught her that big projects are doable.** When an MES graduate comes along as a partner, or across her desk as an applicant, she knows that they also recognize this truth.

## Keeping It Personal: Advice from Alumni and Faculty Member Tyrus Smith, 1997

Tyrus Smith completed his MES in 1997 and his PhD from George Mason University in 2001. He has been a faculty member at The Evergreen State College since 2001. Currently, he teaches a variety of environmental studies and environmental policy courses, and leads student learning in research and statistics at the Evergreen Tacoma campus.

Tyrus remembers the people best about his time in MES. He recalls clearly the faculty he learned from, and the advisors who supervised his thesis research. His thesis looked at the environmental justice impacts of the recently passed Hope VI Initiative by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Tacoma (where he grew up and lived). He conducted a variety of interviews and studied public health data to investigate how housing displacement in Tacoma, as a result of the Hope VI legislation, exacerbated various environmental justice issues like lead exposure and indoor air quality for the tenants of low income housing developments. **His thesis topic was timely, relevant, and personal to him because it focused on his community.** This is a good recipe for deeper learning in his opinion – students have a better chance of remembering their work, and carrying it with them, if they are personally connected.

Many MES students and applicants express concerns about the job market in environmental fields, especially as our current administration has shown a lack of support for science around climate change, environmental protections, and renewable energy. Tyrus’ advice is to remember that this is not new. He recalls the strong environmental activism during the Reagan years and how this seemed to abruptly end with the election of Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992. Tyrus believes there will always be work in environmental fields, and that state and local opportunities are continually growing. People who are interested in working in the environmental sector must be creative, open, and reflective about their career aspirations – there are options, but students may not be considering all potential paths and opportunities available to them. He says, “The definition of the ‘environmental field’ may expand or may have already expanded beyond what students are considering.”

This necessary independence and ingenuity are areas where students will definitely grow in the MES program. MES is very flexible, and provides less explicit direction than many traditional graduate programs, forcing students to grow and consider their own interests, and ways in which to pursue them. Tyrus acknowledges there are some students who feel more comfortable moving forward if they can come into the MES program with a concrete idea about what they are interested in pursuing. His advice for students struggling as they work to focus their studies or develop their thesis question is to look for connections. “This is a benefit of MES and environmental studies in general; students are allowed and encouraged to see connections in different ways.”

That connection, between disparate disciplines like ecology and economics, to lived experience and familiar topics, is vitally important for students to remember as they develop skills and prepare to graduate from MES. Tyrus’ take on the mission of MES and program graduates is this: **“if you can’t communicate your knowledge to laypersons, then how valuable is your knowledge? It is our responsibility to convey science in a way people can understand. Don’t use your knowledge as a weapon. Use it as a tool to make positive change.”**

## Student Updates

Second-year student Allison Borges recently attended the US Region Meeting of the **International Association of Landscape Ecology** in Chicago. Read about her experience on the [MES Blog](http://www.evergreen.edu/mes/post/allisons-visit-us-regional-association-international-association-landscape-ecology).

**Don't Forget!** Students in the Master of Environmental Studies Association (MESA) are hosting the [29th Annual Rachel Carson Forum](http://www.evergreen.edu/mes/rachel-carson-forum) on Thursday, May 10th. This year's theme is **Art as Environmental Activism**.