Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

Community Engagement Fellow: Gregory O'Neil, WWU Department of Chemistry

Project Title: Improving Science Communication at WWU

Project Description:
I entered the Community Engagement Fellows (CEF) program with a broad interest in improving the communication of science to the general public. There are a number of reasons why science communication is important, for instance to better inform public policy decisions. With advances in social media, there are now more opportunities for direct communication between scientists and a wide-ranging audience.

My own interest in science communication stems in part from a desire to improve the broader impacts of my own research program involving students at WWU. Other WWU science faculty are also engaged in a variety of cutting-edge research**,** but arguably have fallen short in communicating these efforts to the broader community.

At the start of the CEF program I only had a few rough ideas about how to promote and improve the broad dissemination of science by WWU faculty and students. These ideas were shaped by my own recent successes and failures in this area, as I dabbled with various non-traditional outlets for communicating research results from my group aimed at a wider audience. This included magazine articles, press releases, interviews, and videos. Through organized meetings with other CE Fellows where I had the opportunity to discuss these activities and other ideas, it became clear that I (and presumably other science faculty) would benefit from some sort of formal training on science communication.

I was not the only CE Fellow in this cohort interested in improving science communication. Travis put me in touch with another Fellow Ruth Sofield (WWU, Environmental Science), and we met to discuss our shared goals. Through these conversations I learned of a workshop developed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) with the stated goal of "building scientists' communication skill and confidence in engaging with public audiences and providing best practices for use of different communication methods and mechanisms". For our purposes, their "Science Communication Fundamentals" (a 3 hour workshop covering the basics of science communication and public presentations) seemed ideal.

Cost for the AAAS workshop was $6000 (for up to 50 participants). In the weeks that followed I was able to raise the funds through various WWU sources (e.g. Dean and Provost's office, Research and Sponsored Programs, Chemistry and E.Sci. Departments) to host the workshop at WWU this upcoming September. Currently

Ruth and I are in the process of sorting out the details (e.g. time, venue, participants) for the event.

Moving forward, participation in the workshop and follow-up events is intended to create a cohort of science and engineering faculty dedicated to communicating science and trained on how to effectively do so. Various products will be expected from this group including new media (e.g. for Spark Science) on scientific topics aimed at improving overall scientific literacy and creating new connections with community groups.

Looking back, I can say with certainty that had I not participated in the CEF program the AAAS workshop (which will effect a large number of people) would not be occurring this upcoming September. Setting aside time to think and work on my ideas as well as interact with Travis and receive feedback from other CE Fellows was critical to the success of my project. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity and excited about the outcome.