



Setting High Standards: Teacher Education Accreditation Incorporates Environmental Education

by Michele Archie

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These days, Dr. Terry Wilson is a busy man. In 2003, Kentucky added environmental education as a major theme for all preservice teacher education programs in the state. Three years later, the state approved a graduate-level endorsement in environmental education. Now, Kentucky’s colleges and universities can offer teachers the opportunity to add an environmental education endorsement to their teaching certificates.

Dr. Wilson directs the Center for Environmental Education and Sustainability at Western Kentucky University. “It’s all come together for our teacher environmental education programs,” says Wilson. “We have students knocking at our door, our classes are filling up, and I have no problem getting new courses approved.”

Photo provided by Terry Wilson



Dr. Terry Wilson, NAAEE’s
Liaison with NCATE

Wilson believes that a bold move by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) had a lot to do with Kentucky’s decision to formalize environmental education’s place in its teacher education system. “Kentucky has long been a leader in environmental education, but I don’t think the state would be embracing environmental education today if NAAEE had not joined the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) [in 2002]. Coming to the NCATE table put environmental education more clearly on formal education’s radar screen. I think the Kentucky

Education Professional Standards Board was basically saying, ‘We need to get a leg up on this.’”

Wilson acknowledged that joining NCATE was a big decision for a small organization like NAAEE*. (NCATE’s membership includes education heavyweights such as the National Education Association with 3.2 million members, the National Science Teachers Association, and the National Council for Social Studies.) But, after serving as NAAEE’s liaison with NCATE since 2002—and on NCATE’s executive board since 2007—Wilson believes the investment of time,

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effort, and money has already paid big dividends. “Kentucky may be an exceptionally strong example, but it’s not the only place where change is happening. There is now plenty of dialogue involving universities and state agencies across the country about how to stay ahead of the curve on building environmental education into the teacher education system.”

Signs of Progress

In Washington state, that dialogue has come a long way in the past two years. Gilda Wheeler supervises the Education for Environment and Sustainability program in Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. She says that NAAEE’s standards for preservice education and professional development, and the formalization of those standards through NCATE, were keys in making the state’s new Environment and Sustainability teacher endorsement possible. “The state professional education standards board started allowing specialty area endorsements a couple years ago. New endorsements, and the competencies that ground them, have to be based on national standards. NAAEE’s professional development standards are an essential underpinning, and the acceptance of NAAEE’s standards by NCATE really elevated their legitimacy.”

In May 2009, Washington’s Environment and Sustainability endorsement was approved. Already, Wheeler notes, “a couple of colleges of education are planning to offer this endorsement starting this year, and several more are interested.”

Back in Kentucky, Terry Wilson points to changes sparked by NAAEE’s involvement in NCATE as a major reason for postponing his retirement. The grey-bearded professor is a long-time environmental education advocate. “Why in the world would I want to give up now, after working toward this kind of systemic progress for so long?”

Ultimately, what makes Terry Wilson so willing to put off a life of writing, traveling, and spending time with his granddaughter is the opportunity to weave environmental education into the fabric of teacher education: “When many, many more teachers are, themselves, environmentally literate and well-prepared to offer that education to their students, we’ll know we have made meaningful progress.”

In November 2007, NCATE adopted NAAEE’s standards for environmental education teacher education programs. This step opened the possibility for any of NCATE’s member institutions to develop an accredited teacher education program in environmental education. “This gives us a new tool for reaching out and encouraging more preservice education programs,” says Sue Bumpous, NAAEE’s communications officer. “Integrating environmental education into these programs gives our profession incredible leverage that we have had a hard time gaining in the past.”

To understand the potential of that leverage, it helps to take a step back and better understand NCATE and the process and power of accreditation.

Accreditation Shapes Teacher Education Programs

NAEE became a member of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 2002, joining a coalition of 33 organizations with a shared commitment to high-quality teaching. Founded in 1954, NCATE currently accredits 632 colleges of education, with nearly 100 more seeking recognition. Two-thirds of the nation's new teacher graduates come from NCATE-accredited schools. The U.S. Department of Education recognizes NCATE as the nation's professional accrediting body for programs that educate teachers, administrators, and other professional school personnel. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation also recognizes NCATE.

The quality of professional education is commonly assured through accreditation of preparatory programs. Architecture, medicine, law, and engineering schools are held to high standards through accreditation. Education schools are no different. NCATE sets national standards and oversees rigorous review to ensure that preschool through high school teacher education programs are suitably preparing new teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need.

Setting standards was the primary reason Dr. Bora Simmons became interested in creating an environmental education presence within NCATE. Now retired from the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University, but hardly retired from environmental education, Simmons has been a driving force in articulating national guidelines for the field. At the helm of the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education, she spearheaded the creation of guidelines for learners, instructional materials, nonformal programs, and professional development. "Like it or not," said Simmons, "standards are part of the backbone of today's education system. They are intended to lend discipline and consistency, and are really the only way to fit into the basic framework for education at the state and local levels."

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Photo provided by Joe Baust



Teacher candidate identifying foliage.

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NCATE’s standards influence the very nature of teacher education programs. Simmons believes that “participating offers us a great opportunity to weave environmental education into existing standards for professional preparation, and to have our own standards used to guide the accreditation of environmental education teacher preparation programs.”

Putting NCATE’s System to Work for Environmental Education



All schools, colleges, and departments of education that receive accreditation meet NCATE’s six “unit standards.” To maintain accreditation, each program is reviewed every seven years for adherence to these standards, which cover both the performance of teacher candidates in the program and the components and practices of the teacher education program itself.

In addition to the unit standards, NCATE has approved standards in 20 “special program areas.” When the environmental education standards were approved in 2007, NAAEE joined the ranks of professional organizations representing fields ranging from early childhood education to educational communications and technology. Each organization has created its own NCATE program area standards. Institutions with programs in any of these 20 areas may apply for NCATE accreditation of their programs.

NAAEE modeled its process for formulating program standards on the successful experiences of other NCATE members, assembling a writing team from amongst its members and incorporating a broad-based review process involving professionals in the field and other NCATE member organizations.

The writing team did not have to start from scratch, notes Bora Simmons, who headed the group. “The input of more than 1,000 reviewers in the development of *Guidelines for Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators* gave us a solid starting point for formulating NCATE standards. The writing team started with that document, and reworked the guidelines into performance-based standards written in a language that NCATE members would find familiar.” NAAEE’s writing team also added assessment rubrics and other details that would make the standards useful to teacher education programs and accreditation teams.

Some three years after the writing team began its work, the environmental education standards gained the approval of NCATE’s Special Program Area Standards Board.

A Long Haul, but Worth the Payoff



Acceptance of the standards, says Wilson, was great progress, but still just a steppingstone in a long-term project: “It will be another five years before we see much impact on teacher education. This is a long haul, but well worth the payoff.” In part, the lag has to do with the fact that each institution’s status is reviewed every seven years, so accreditation of environmental education programs will take place over time. Also, it takes time for programs developed in response to the new standards to get up and running.

As demand builds, NAAEE intends to be ready. Already, it has trained six members to review reports submitted by institutions seeking NCATE accreditation under the environmental education standards. The first report is expected in fall 2009.

Among the first universities to seek accreditation for its environmental education program will be Eastern Kentucky University. Billy Bennett, who directs the university’s Center for Environmental Education, believes “national recognition will be a good recruiting tool for the environmental education endorsement that we offer.” The Center undertook a three-year effort to collect data on its program and compile it for its accreditation request. Bennett notes, “That process helped us take a critical look at our program and how we could improve it. Over time, NCATE recognition will also help keep us constantly looking for ways to make our courses and our program better.”

Wilson believes that the NCATE standards will keep NAAEE and its U.S. affiliates busy. As the professional organization behind the standards, NAAEE is positioned to offer training programs and consultation to help schools of education build strong environmental education programs. “That could become a source of funds for NAAEE,” Wilson notes. “This kind of consulting relationship is not uncommon within other special program areas. It’s good for the professional organization, and it’s good for the schools since it increases their chances of being accredited.”

NAAEE has already started offering training for “compilers,” the university faculty members who assemble an institution’s program report when seeking accreditation under the environmental education standards. But, as NAAEE’s Sue Bumpous points out, the

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Photo provided by Joe Baust

Future teachers learn environmental education activities by doing.

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Teacher candidate participating in a stream monitoring exercise.

accreditation process under the new NCATE standards has yet to gain momentum, so the bulk of the training and consulting opportunities for NAAEE lie in the future.

For the moment, she believes that NAAEE needs to focus on helping colleges and universities implement the environmental education standards, and in many cases, develop environmental education preservice programs. “Eventually,” says Bumpous, “accreditation will bring consistent standards to environmental education instruction among recognized schools, and give students a way to select schools with outstanding programs. But for now, only a small number of NCATE-accredited teacher education programs have environmental education offerings. One of our main challenges is getting more programs in place.”

Fostering Preservice Environmental Education

NAAEE’s efforts to expand the pool and quality of preservice environmental education programs focus on two efforts. The first is building an online directory of environmental education programs and faculty*. The directory contains basic information about 750 institutions, and confirmation of program and faculty details is underway. Bumpous explains, “The directory is set up so that individual faculty members or program directors add information about themselves and their programs. This isn’t always their highest priority, but we are working through NAAEE’s U.S. affiliates and other partner organizations to slowly but surely build a truly useful resource. This directory offers a way for instructors to network with, and learn from, each other. It is also a source of information that will enable students to select programs that fit their needs and interests.”

The directory is also a vehicle for publicizing opportunities such as NAAEE’s mentoring fellowship program*. Five fellowships have been granted thus far to faculty who are, as Bumpous explains, “interested in learning about how to do environmental education preparation for teachers. The fellowships provide resources for these educators to connect with and learn from other professors and programs.”

As co-chair of NAAEE’s Preservice Advisory Council, Christine Moseley is keenly aware of the need to provide incentives for environmental education programs to form and expand. “Guidelines and the possibility for accreditation can be important tools for

educators and programs. In other fields, I've seen accredited or otherwise certified programs successfully argue for maintaining their budgets and even expanding their offerings because of the need to keep up with the standards for accreditation. NAAEE's standards can offer just such a tool for environmental education programs."

The Bigger Picture

Bora Simmons observes that NAAEE's membership in NCATE has increased the visibility of environmental education within the broader world of education. "The fact that we're sitting at the table with these formal educational institutions and organizations has already brought environmental education a level of visibility and credibility that the field has never achieved before."

Christine Moseley, who is also a preservice environmental education professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio, concurs: "Being involved in NCATE is one more way to get our voices as environmental educators heard and recognized. I am one of five NAAEE representatives on NCATE's Board of Examiners, so I serve on teams that conduct accreditation site visits to institutions. Just through NAAEE's presence on these teams, I see that our field gains credibility among deans, special education folks, and other people who suddenly think more seriously about environmental education as a profession and as a possibility for their institution."

Like NAAEE and the field of environmental education, NCATE has positioned itself as part of the education reform movement. Through changes in its accreditation process and the formulation of standards based on systemic assessment and performance-based learning, NCATE aims to shift practices in mainstream education to those that best help students apply knowledge, reason analytically, and solve problems. According to Bora Simmons, "There's no question that environmental education can make a big contribution to that effort."

A shared basic philosophy of education may also provide NAAEE with the opportunity for continued influence on the unit standards that apply to all NCATE-accredited programs. In 2006, NAAEE participated in a review of the unit standards. Reviews like these, the periodic review of special program area standards, and NCATE's broader considerations such as how to streamline its accreditation and review process, offer what Terry Wilson calls a "side door" approach to infusing environmental education into NCATE accreditation.

Wilson notes, "Being a part of NCATE for eight years now has offered a great opportunity to build relationships with people from other professional areas within education. I think we've been able to clear away a lot of misconceptions about our field, and help other members see how environmental education supports their

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Professional environmental education development includes learning to use technologies for water sampling and other field activities.

goals. We've gained influence with social studies, science, elementary education—all kinds of fields looking to weave in environmental education."

When Terry Wilson was appointed to NCATE's Executive Board in 2007, he welcomed the opportunity to interact with the "biggies in the education world." His eyes sparkling at the prospect of building even more bridges with the education establishment, he explained, "You get to talking to some traditional teacher educators and someone will say, 'Oh,

environmental education. I may not know what that all means...but gee, it makes a lot of sense, especially at this time in our culture.' And that's when the fun really begins."

** NAAEE's work with NCATE, its online directory and mentorship activities are supported by the Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP). EETAP is a national leader in delivering environmental education training for education professionals. EETAP is funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Education Division through a cooperative agreement with the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. For more information about EETAP visit www.eetap.org.*

Resources

For more information on the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, visit www.ncate.org. To download NAAEE's special program area standards, see www.ncate.org/ProgramStandards/NAAEE/NAAEEStandards.pdf.

For access to the environmental education guidelines and other publications of the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education, visit www.NAAEE.org. Follow the "Programs and Initiatives" link to "Guidelines for Excellence."

To see or participate in the EE online higher education directory, visit www.NAAEE.org. Follow the "Programs and Initiatives" link to "Higher Education Directory."

Michele Archie is a principal of The Harbinger Consulting Group (www.harbingerconsult.com). She authored several publications produced by the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education (a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education) including *Environmental Education Materials: Guidelines for Excellence*, *Excellence in Environmental Education: Guidelines for Learning (K-12)*, and *Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators*. Michele has collaborated on the production of community discussion guides on environmental issues, curriculum materials, and educator training programs.