

RE: Innovation at The Evergreen State College

**Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education**

STARS: Sustainability Tracking Assessment & Rating System

1536 Wynkoop St., Ste. B500,  
Denver, CO 80202

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To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to express the innovative nature of The Research Ambassador Program at The Evergreen State College. The Research Ambassador Program fosters creative public engagement by bringing science and scientists to non-traditional public audiences. The Program focuses on creating linkages and interactions between ecosystem scientists and public audiences. It is funded by the National Science Foundation. It is one of a small number of projects that is supported as a "Early-Concept Grant for Exploratory Research".

Scientists can provide important and timely insights into environmental issues and concerns. However, they encounter professional, and institutional challenges that often hinder and/or prohibit effective synthesis and distribution of scientific knowledge and research findings<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally scientists have relied on the media or informal science education institutions to forge communication pathways and disseminate research findings to the public, but journalists themselves are hindered by deadlines, lack of expertise, competing events, and limited air time and column space<sup>2</sup>. Many citizens do visit zoos, aquariums, parks, and other venues where they can learn about ecosystems, but typically, it is a more scientifically aware and active population that seeks these venues<sup>3</sup>. In the long term, direct outreach to non-traditional audiences can inspire others to engage with science, and contribute to a sociopolitical climate for supporting conservation initiatives and/or further scientific research<sup>4</sup>.

Communications training available to scientists is very limited. Most graduate and doctoral degree programs do not include coursework in communications. Most trainings that do exist (e.g., The Leopold Leadership Program) focus on interactions with journalists and policymakers. The Research Ambassador Program innovatively promotes direct interactions to underserved audiences and provides appropriate rewards to support scientists and overcome the substantial barriers that scientists encounter.

The Research Ambassador Program was established to link scientists with those who are less scientifically aware and engaged through scientist-driven communications training and mentoring, and partnerships with underserved public audiences (e.g., prisoners, church-goers, seniors

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<sup>1</sup> Osmond, D.L., N.M. Nadkarni, C.T. Driscoll, E. Andrews, A.J. Gold, S. R. Broussard Allred, A.R. Berkowitz, M. W. Klemens, T.L. Loecke, M.A. McGarry, K Schwarz, M. L. Washington, and P. M. Groffman. 2010. The role of interface organizations in science communication and understanding. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. **5**: 306-313

<sup>2</sup> Friedman, S., S. Dunwoody, and C. Rogers. 1986. Scientists and journalists: reporting science as news. Free Press, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Nadkarni, N.M. 2004. Not Preaching to the Choir: Communicating the Importance of Forest Conservation to Nontraditional audiences. *Conservation biology*. **18**: 602-606.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Further, numerous high profile scientists and ecologists have identified the need for scientists to conduct outreach and receive training, including American Association for the Advancement of Science chief executive Alan Leshner<sup>5-6</sup>, the President's Advisor to Science John Holdren.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, this program represents an innovative effort to engage non-traditional audiences with current ecosystem science. This work helps build an educated citizenry that can make decisions that support sustainability and ecosystem health.

Sincerely,

**Nalini M. Nadkarni, Ph.D.**  
Member of the Faculty  
The Evergreen State College  
2700 Evergreen Parkway NW, Lab II  
Olympia, Washington 98505

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<sup>5</sup> Leshner, A. 2003. Public engagement with science. *Science*. **299**:977.

<sup>6</sup> Leshner, A. 2007. Outreach training needed. *Science* **315**:161.

<sup>7</sup> Holbrook, J. B. and R. Frodeman. Fall 2005. Policy Dimensions of NSF's Criterion 2. *Newsletter of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research*. University of Colorado at Boulder **13**:4-5.