



UCCS faculty creating a culture of innovation in teaching

Imagine a classroom where:

- Geography students work with local organizations to address environmental issues
- Gaming students program an App to assist people with learning disabilities
- Landscape design students design and plant a garden at a homeless shelter

Faculty at Work

Questions, suggestions, or comments about Faculty at Work?

Would you like to nominate someone to be featured?

Email frc@uccs.edu

Eric Billmeyer, Senior Instructor Department of Geography and Environmental Studies

Service-learning presents students with real-world problems while achieving course objectives, practicing critical thinking skills and meeting the needs in a community. Research indicates that service learning increases awareness of civic, social, and diversity issues.

Eric Billmeyer teaches GES 4480: Environmental Problems of Colorado with service learning in mind. In the past, the course integrated discussion of local environmental issues with guest speakers who specialized in the topic. There was no direct student involvement in the community. As part of a **High-Impact Teaching Practices** grant, Eric redesigned his course so that students engaged with a variety of non-profit organizations addressing local environmental issues including energy conservation, homelessness, and water pollution.

Read the complete interview with Eric Billmeyer.



An Interview with Eric Billmeyer, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, 2016 recipient of a High Impact Teaching Practices grant

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement is the process of actively engaging individuals in the process of exploring and addressing societal issues that are important to the community.

Describe the course and assignment. How did the civic engagement activity contribute to class material?

The course, GES 4480: Environmental Problems of Colorado was developed with the following course goals in mind:

- Assess existing political, socio-economic, ethical, cultural and legal frameworks for environmental decision making;
- Examine through case studies the complexity of local and regional environmental problems and the effectiveness of proposed solutions;
- Provoke discussion and inspiration about environmental issues;
- Increase individual connection and involvement with local and global environmental issues

In the past, the course had integrated the discussion of local environmental issues with guest speakers who specialized in the topic at hand but was lacking direct involvement by the students. In the spring 2016, I redesigned the course so the students were physically involved with addressing local environmental issues by engaging with a variety of non-profit organizations at a local project site. Three local non-profits, the Energy Resource Center, Keep Colorado Springs Beautiful, Inc., and the Pikes Peak Justice and Peace Commission agreed to work with the students. Together, the students and the organizations worked on projects addressing the local issues of energy conservation, homelessness, and water pollution. Over a three-week block during the course of the semester, students explore each of these issues. For each issue, the first week provided the framework for understanding the issue in a broader context and introduced the mission and values of the participating non-profit organization. During the second week, the students worked directly with staff and volunteers from the participating non-profit to examine the issue within the community. The final week as part of an in-class reflective exercise, students discussed the project work and examined other possible solutions to addressing the local issue. The course wrapped-up with students designing a plan to establish their own non-profit addressing a local environmental issue of their choice.

What did you gain from the teaching experience?

I am a very strong proponent of experiential education. I teach introductory geology classes where field experiences help the students understand the concepts presented in the class. This class was no different. It was wonderful to see the students' understanding of the environment issues we explored just blossom with the hands-on connection to our community.

What do you think your students gained from the experience?

Many students stated their connection to the community was stronger after the class and that they were more likely to volunteer or become more actively engaged in local issues. I also think they were inspired by the dedication and passion the directors of the non-profits exhibited pursuing their organization's mission. The students designed a framework for starting their own non-profit as their final project. I hope that this inspiration will carry many of those ideas forward successfully.

From your perspective, how did the community agency or agencies benefit?

The participating organizations were able to inspire and engage with a very vibrant group of students. I think the folks at the organizations were just as impressed with our students as the students were with them. Having worked in the non-profit sector for many years, I know that gaining the support of the under 30 population is vitally important for long-term success of any non-profit. I think they were very encouraged to see the authentic interest the students **showed in their work.**

What was your greatest success story in this experience?

Really seeing the students connect with issues on a local level and being so actively involved in the class on a week-to-week basis.

What was your biggest challenge in this experience?

Trying not to stress out too much about scheduling and weather conflicts for the on-site field days! Fortunately, we were lucky and we did not have any issues.

Would you recommend the incorporation of civic engagement learning to other instructors? Why or why not?

Definitely! The students overwhelmingly enjoyed the opportunities to work with local non-profits on local issues. The service learning experiences enhanced the course material and really deepened the student's understanding of the issues explored.