



Setting High Standards: Environmental Education Builds a Home in Teacher Education Accreditation

by Michele Archie

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- Dr. Terry Wilson



Photo provided by Terry Wilson

Dr. Terry Wilson, NAAEE's liaison with NCATE

In 2003, Kentucky added environmental education to its requirements for all preservice teacher education programs in the state. Only a few other states have similar requirements in place. What prompted Kentucky to make this significant change?

Terry Wilson believes that a bold move by the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) has a lot to do with it. “Kentucky has long been a leader in environmental education, but I don’t think the state would be requiring environmental education in teacher education programs today if NAAEE had not joined the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). 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.’”

Dr. Wilson directs the Center for Mathematics, Science, and Environmental Education at Western Kentucky University. He 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 2.7 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, Wilson believes the investment of time, effort, and money is already paying 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 within universities and between universities and state agencies across the country about how to stay ahead of the curve on building environmental education into the teacher education system.”

The grey-bearded professor is a long-time environmental education advocate. He is so enthusiastic about the progress being made as a result of NAAEE’s involvement with NCATE that he’s postponing his retirement. “Why in the world would I want to give up now, after working toward this kind of systemic progress for so long?”

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Accreditation Shapes Teacher Education Programs



What makes Terry Wilson so willing to put off a life of writing, traveling, and spending time with his granddaughter? Mostly, he said, it's 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."

When NAAEE became a member of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 2002, it joined a coalition of 33 organizations with a shared commitment to high-quality teaching. Founded in 1954, NCATE currently accredits 614 colleges of education, with 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, and 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.



Photo provided by Joe Baust

Teacher candidate identifying foliage.

Setting standards was the primary reason Dr. Bora Simmons became interested in creating an environmental education presence within NCATE. A professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University, Bora Simmons has been a driving force in articulating national guidelines for the environmental education field. While 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. "Standards," said Simmons, "are part of the backbone of today's education system. They lend discipline and consistency to the

field, and are really the only way to fit into the basic framework for education at the state and local levels.”

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 brought forward.”

Plugging into NCATE’s System



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” ranging from early childhood education to foreign languages education to educational communications and technology. Each set of program area standards was created by the relevant NCATE member professional organization. Institutions with programs in any of these 20 areas may apply for NCATE accreditation of their programs.

When Terry Wilson came on board as NAAEE’s liaison with NCATE, he was appointed to the Special Program Area Standards Board. The board helps member organizations develop special area standards, and approves them for use. On this board, Wilson received a firsthand education in the process of developing NCATE program standards.

“Sitting on this board for three years,” Wilson noted, “has been 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 goals.”

Special program area standards must be reviewed every seven years, providing a means for regular updating and revision. Wilson sees this process as offering a “side door” approach to infusing environmental education into NCATE accreditation. The example he cites occurred at the last special program area board meeting when the Association for Childhood Education International representative asked for board input as the association reviews and revises its standards for elementary education. Terry Wilson offered NAAEE’s assistance, and now several environmental educators are reviewing the elementary education standards, looking for places to insert or strengthen concepts important to their field.

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NAAEE is also using a “front door” approach to incorporating environmental education into the accreditation process. In 2005, NAAEE began formulating program area standards for environmental education, with an eye toward submitting them for NCATE approval after a development process of two or three years. (Click here, *Figure 1*, to see how NAAEE is involved in NCATE standards-setting.)

Teresa Mourad, NAAEE chief operations officer, believes that putting program standards in place through NCATE could yield significant benefits to the field. “Accreditation will enable students to select schools with outstanding programs with confidence. And environmental education instruction will be more consistent across the country among recognized schools.”

But, Mourad notes, only a small number of NCATE-accredited teacher education programs currently have environmental education offerings. “One of our main challenges is getting more programs in place so that, when our standards are adopted by NCATE, they have more impact. What I’d like to see is a groundswell of academics in our field reaching out to the teacher education departments at their institutions, forming partnerships that provide the foundation for new environmental education teacher preparation programs.”

A Long Haul, but Worth the Payoff

NAAEE modeled its process for formulating environmental education program standards on the successful experiences of other NCATE members. Terry Wilson described this iterative process of review and revision as “a long haul, but well worth the payoff.” NAAEE assembled a writing team from among its members, and in spring 2004, this team began working on the first draft of the NCATE standards.

The writing team did not have to start from scratch, noted Bora Simmons, who heads 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.”

To its basic framework of standards, NAAEE’s writing team is now adding detail that will make the standards useful to teacher education programs and accreditation teams. This detail includes specific performance standards and rubrics for assessing whether these standards are being met.

In addition to soliciting feedback on the draft standards from NAAEE members, the writing team is reaching out to other organizations with

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environmental education connections and content expertise. Terry Wilson explained, “NCATE looks for a very wide-ranging review process. The more broadly we reach out for input, the more confident other NCATE members—who may not be versed in the environmental education field—will be that these are accurate, relevant, and broadly accepted indicators of success.”

NCATE members, especially those who sit on the Special Program Area Standards Board, will also be indispensable in the development of environmental education standards. Their review will help ensure that NAAEE’s standards are written in a way that is meaningful to a broad spectrum of educators.

In time, said Wilson, the writing team will complete its task and the NAAEE board will agree that the standards are ready to present for NCATE approval. At that point, NCATE’s Special Program Area Standards Board will review the standards and either approve them or send them back to NAAEE for more development. “We’re trying to avoid having them sent back for more review and revision,” said Bora Simmons. “That’s why we’re so patient about taking our time now. This is a long-term project.”

Wilson concurs. “Even after NCATE adopts our environmental education program standards, it will be another five years before we see much impact on teacher education.” 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.

Then What?



Wilson believes that the NCATE standards will keep NAAEE and its state affiliates busy, even after they are adopted. As the professional organization behind the standards, NAAEE is positioned to offer training programs



Photo provided by Joe Baust

Future teachers learn environmental education activities by doing.



Teacher candidate participating in a stream monitoring exercise.

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 good for the schools since it increases their chances for being accredited.”

Where there are strong state-level environmental education affiliates, Wilson sees opportunities for them to encourage universities to put programs into place and to assist in program development. “Look at how far we’ve come in three years,” he says. “As this relationship continues, environmental education will continue to gain credibility, and that should be good for all of the organizations in the field.”

Teresa Mourad believes that NCATE membership and the effort to formulate standards for environmental education may be good for NAAEE as well: “Our organization is relatively small, with 1,500 members. It’s exciting to see Terry and the writing team leveraging our expertise to put NAAEE in a more influential position within the broader field of education.”

Bora Simmons observed that NAAEE’s membership in NCATE has already increased the visibility of environmental education within the broader education world. “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 we’ve never achieved before.”

The Bigger Picture

B Back home in Kentucky, Terry Wilson believes environmental education is gaining momentum within the teacher education system. Last year, Kentucky approved a graduate-level endorsement in environmental education, adopting NAAEE’s *Guidelines for Excellence in the Professional Preparation of Environmental Educators* as the foundational content standards. Between the 2003 addition of environmental education to the state’s teacher education program requirements and last year’s approval of the environmental education endorsement, there is more than enough incentive for schools to bring their programs up to speed.

“In this climate,” Wilson noted, “I’m finding it easier to get support for new environmental education courses. I think that’s probably the case in most Kentucky universities these days.”

Like NAAEE and the broader 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 to influence the unit standards that apply to all NCATE-accredited programs. NAAEE and its writing team participated in the recent review of the NCATE unit standards. Feeding into these unit standards is another one of Terry Wilson’s “side door” strategies for bringing the influence of environmental education to bear.

When NAAEE submits its program standards for NCATE approval, Terry Wilson will not participate in their review. He was recently appointed to NCATE’s Executive Board, which reviews decisions made by all the other NCATE committees. “Most of the committee members are biggies in the education world,” he explained as his eyes lit up at the prospect of building even more bridges with the education establishment. “Even in that room, you get to talking and someone will say, ‘Oh, environmental education. I hadn’t thought too much about that...but, gee, it makes a lot of sense.’ And that’s when the fun really begins.”

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Photo provided by Joe Baust

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

NAAEE’s accreditation efforts are made possible with support from the Environmental Education and Training Partnership, which is funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Environmental Education. Sue Bumpous, NAAEE Communications Officer, is the staff liaison for the accreditation efforts.

Resources

For more information on the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, visit www.NCATE.org.

For access to the environmental education guidelines and other publications of the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education, visit www.NAAEE.org. Click on the “EE Guidelines” link.

To contribute to the review and development of the NAAEE environmental education program area standards, watch www.NAAEE.org for new announcements, or contact Dr. Bora Simmons at boras@niu.edu.