Closing Report on Curriculum Development Grant Entitled, “Politics and the Yellowstone Ecosystem”

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1) Description of Grant Supported Activity

My proposal requested funding so that I could attend a workshop entitled “Politics and the Yellowstone Ecosystem” from August 3rd to August 8th, 2009. The workshop was organized jointly by the American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Yellowstone Association Institute, and it was part of ADP’s Civic Engagement in Action Series called “The Stewardship of Public Lands.”

I used funding from both the Curriculum Development Grant and a UCET / FACET Faculty Development Award to cover my registration (which included some meals and lodging) and part of my travel expenses.

My motivation to attend the conference was to add a new dimension to my N190 Geology of the National Parks course. First of all, attending the workshop provided the opportunity to obtain firsthand experience with the geology of Yellowstone National Park, and by driving out, I was also able to visit Grand Tetons and Badlands NPs, and Devils Tower National Monument. Furthermore, the workshop introduced me to the complicated politics of managing migrating wildlife.

As a brief example, bison from Yellowstone leave park-owned land in the winter, typically heading north into Paradise Valley, where they have the potential of interacting with livestock. This creates a complicated political problem because the ranchers, who rely on the livestock to support their families, fear the spread of disease (specifically, the bacterium brucellosis) from the bison to their cattle.

It turns out that the scientific basis for this fear is not clearly established (nor has it been definitively shown to be unfounded), yet the fear is strong, and the consequences of disease spreading to cattle is severe. In addition to factual information, the key aspect of the workshop was that we interacted closely with scientists, bison advocates and ranchers to develop an understanding of all viewpoints. The complicated nature of this conflict made this approach particularly valuable, and I genuinely came away with a much broader perspective of the issues involved.

Whereas I tend to focus on the geological science of national parks, I wanted to attend the workshop to learn more about such issues and add a broader, more interdisciplinary, component to what I teach.
2) Were you able to complete the project? Describe any difficulty you had.

Yes. I attended the workshop, and everything went very well. In all sincerity, it was the most interesting and valuable workshop I’ve ever attended.

3) Did, or will, the project result in a specific product -- a manuscript, composition, syllabus, etc? If so, please describe and indicate state of development.

Yes. In terms of the geological science of national parks, I obtained first-hand photos and experience in the geology of three different tectonic environment, and I’ve incorporated this material permanently into my course.

I also now dedicate at least one class meeting to such non-geological issues facing the park system (in addition to shorter asides spread throughout the semester). The students find this material engaging, and for many it provides an avenue through which they can connect the course to other areas for which they may have prior experience or knowledge.

Finally, I made a presentation about what I learned in the December 3rd, 2009 UCET Holiday event.