ECoGSS: A student-led departmental symposium integrating research and critical discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion

Dept. of Environmental Conservation, Univ. of Massachusetts Amherst
*Primary contact: cgangerson@umass.edu

Why have departmental symposiums?
They serve vital roles in graduate student professional development by providing opportunities to practice and receive feedback on science communication skills in a safe, familiar environment, while instilling a sense of department camaraderie and collegiality.

What’s missing from departmental symposiums?
However, symposiums rarely focus on topics related to historical and contemporary issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Why DEI belongs in the conversation: Without active engagement in DEI, symposiums may fail to instill a sense of department camaraderie and collegiality.

ECoGSS: A blueprint for student-led symposiums
ECoGSS provides a blueprint for a graduate student-led symposium that showcases student research, improves communication and networking skills, and centers discussions of DEI issues within conservation science.

Determining Priorities
Pre- and post-symposium evaluation surveys to guide the content and structure of symposium

Present
Provide diverse formats to present research

Network
Connect with colleagues & professionals

Discuss
Center discussions on community and DEI

Creating Engagement
• Seek participants and input from outside the department and outside of the university
• Assemble panels, workshops, and networking events to facilitate interaction among attendees
• Organize post-symposium discussions to promote critical reflection and continue conversations

Incorporating Feedback
• "Reps from non-profits or environmental consulting firms could be invited for workshops.
• Include a "structured networking event with legislators and managers." (many issues that were discussed (climate change, conservation, diversity and inclusion in STEM, personal narratives and trajectories into STEM careers) would be great topics for cross-pollination between Departments.)
• I wish we had something similar with a professional. Building community and personal relationships with faculty.
• The student-to-student support, and the student-to-professor support, and the professional networking in between events.

Facilitating Discussions
• Select a diversity of invited speakers using a transparent process
• Set ground rules to provide a safe environment for discussion
• Connect with people outside of the department to offer critical perspectives

Fostering Inclusion
• Create a symposium Code of Conduct
• Work with University Disability Services to improve accessibility (e.g., access to physical spaces, print alternatives, live captioning)
• Work with Student Parent Programs to arrange family-inclusive spaces
• Provide space for pronouns & preferred names on nametags
• Offer diverse food options

Promoting DEI discussions
• "The focus on diversity and inclusion provided a welcome push for faculty to engage in this topic as well as a way of engaging the graduate students more broadly."
• "Very proud to be part of this department, from research to conversations about diversity and inclusion."

Increasing departmental camaraderie
• "The community... felt so supportive and professional. Building community and personal relationships with faculty." (students and faculty) and beyond (representation from other departments at UMass, agencies, etc.).

Testimonials

Acknowledgments
Our work is funded by the UMass Dept. of Environmental Conservation (ECo), the College of Natural Sciences, UMass BRIDGE, the Graduate Student Senate, and generous local sponsorship. B. dos Santos Dias and H. Sutherland designed the ECoGSS logo. Photographs were taken by L. Guo and D. Drummey.

Visit us!
blogs.umass.edu/ecogss/
ecogss@umass.edu

Pre- and post-symposium evaluation surveys to guide the content and structure of symposium

Roundtable discussion in 2019 with conservation professionals

Incorporating Feedback
• "...provide space to practice communication..." (students and faculty) and beyond (representation from other departments at UMass, agencies, etc.).

Facilitating Discussions
• Select a diversity of invited speakers using a transparent process

Fostering Inclusion
• Create a symposium Code of Conduct

Promoting DEI discussions
• "The focus on diversity and inclusion provided a welcome push for faculty to engage in this topic as well as a way of engaging the graduate students more broadly."

A Brief History of ECoGSS
The Environmental Conservation Graduate Student Symposium (ECoGSS) was formed by graduate students in 2017 with the goal of building a platform that allows students to obtain feedback on their work, while also representing the diverse and interdisciplinary research in our department. Based on traditional metrics of dissemination of research, this symposium has been successful. However, barriers to inclusion could prevent participation across the whole department. Thus, we expanded our mission in 2018 to address DEI issues in the conservation sciences.

To what extent does ECoGSS:
...provide space to practice communication?
• Strongly Agree
• Agree
• Neither agree nor disagree
• Disagree
• Strongly disagree

Grad students

% of survey respondents

Strongly Agree
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Disagree
Strongly disagree

Dept. survey, n = 41 grad, 14 faculty

Seeking Support
• Find departmental allies to help facilitate difficult discussions
• Seek diverse funding sources (e.g., department, college, Graduate Student Senate)
• Seek synergies with groups that share common goals (e.g., UMass BRIDGE to increase diversity of seminar series)

Seeking Support
• Find departmental allies to help facilitate difficult discussions

Showcasing diversity of research
• "Variety of research, bringing together ECo community (students and faculty) and beyond (representation from other departments at UMass, agencies, etc.)."

Testimonials

...hearing about other research going on in ECo, the variety of presentation types, the lightning talks in particular were valuable."