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Dear AERC Colleague,

Members of the AERC Board of Directors and I would like to share with you our excitement about the success of our annual events in Washington DC that took place at the end of October. We tried something a little different from past years in an effort to solidify the effectiveness of AERC's main mission of communicating the importance of ecosystem science to Congress. A big objective in so doing is to encourage Congress to enhance funding for ecosystem research. This year, we added a "how to" workshop to our two other usual activities: the congressional briefing and congressional office visits. This new "triumvirate" of informational and educational activities was enthusiastically received by all in attendance; almost two-thirds of whom were graduate students and postdocs! Here is a summary of these three activities.

AERC-Sponsored Workshop on Communicating Science to the Media and Policy Makers

AERC's annual events in Washington DC kicked off on the morning of October 23rd with a very successful workshop conducted by Rob Groppe and Julie Palakovich Carr of the American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) Public Policy Office, and held at AIBS' offices in Washington. Rob's presentation and hands-on exercises focused on how to communicate with the media and included mock interviews where workshop participants (mainly graduate students) attempted to use the methods Rob described, together with prepared statements, to respond to questions from a reporter (Rob) about each person's own ecosystem research and what its importance was. During the second half of the morning, Julie described how to communicate face to face with a congressional staff person and what methods and techniques can be used to enhance that communication. For this section of the workshop on how to effectively communicate with decision makers, participants broke into groups and practiced giving their 2 min "pitches" to each other under the watchful eyes of former-congressional staffers, Julie and Rob, and those of AERC-member faculty representatives who have first-hand experience communicating with congressional office staff on Capitol Hill.

There were 22 participants in the workshop (mostly graduate students), who were primarily from AERC member institutions, but several were from other institutions, which we hope to attract to membership in the future. More than half of those participating in the workshop applied the coaching they received during visits to their respective congressional offices the next day.

AERC-Sponsored Congressional Briefing on The Role of Ecosystem Science in Food Security

This year's one-hour congressional briefing was attended by a total of 51 people from a variety of governmental, non-governmental, academic, and professional organizations. Staff members from 15 congressional offices participated, 10 House and 5 Senate, with two additional interns from the Senate Agriculture Committee, two members of USAID, and a representative of the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Also participating were one to three members from professional societies (AAAS; Agronomy, Crop and Soil Society; AIBS; Chinese Academy of Sciences). Graduate students, postdocs, and faculty members from 10 universities and research institutes from across the U.S., and one from Canada, rounded out the briefing audience, with most of these coming from AERC member institutions. After the three briefing presentations, the speakers responded to numerous excellent questions. Many in the audience stayed after the formal Q & A to talk with these experts on ecosystem science and food security.

AERC-Sponsored Congressional Office Visits on Capitol Hill

After attending the morning congressional briefing on the role of ecosystem science in food security on October 24th, twelve graduate students and faculty members from seven AERC member institutions visited their respective House and Senate congressional offices. There they presented their own briefing statements on the importance of their own ecosystem research in addressing policy issues and why funding for ecosystem research needs to be expanded.

Enthusiastic Responses from Event Participants

All participants responded very enthusiastically to the series of events that the AERC sponsored this year. Most encouraging to the AERC Board was the enthusiasm students expressed for how much they gained from participating in the events and the gratitude they expressed for having the opportunity to experience first hand—and for the first time—the process of communicating the importance of ecosystem science to policy makers in addressing real-world environmental problems.

Students and postdocs also attended the annual AERC Business Meeting and embraced the opportunities solicited by the Board to become involved in making the AERC more effective at accomplishing its mission. The first action they undertook was to design and conduct a Web-based evaluation survey of participants of this year's DC events. Their objective here, of course, was to learn what participants thought of the effectiveness of their experiences and to learn how planners of next year's events can improve the experience.

Here are some of the general comments from the survey, or expressed in emails to me, from participants; below these comments is specific feedback on the different parts of the meeting:

“Thank you again for everything! I really enjoyed the briefing, and the workshop. I am so glad that this organization exists, and does so much to get ecological science a voice in policy.”

“I thought the overall experience was great, given the chance, I would do it again. The congressional visits were also great. The staffers were very receptive to our concerns, and my partner and I learned a lot from the experience.”

“The AERC events made me want even more to improve my science communication skills, and I plan to take every opportunity I have to do that. Also, I value more the role we can play as scientists in policy making, so I'd love to be more involved with AERC and ABIS in any way that I can.”

“It was a pleasure to help, and it was really interesting to see the feedback from the participants [of] the workshop. Definitely, I [would] like to get more involved with AERC.”

“Thanks for the opportunity to meet you all and interact with staffers. It was truly a great experience and one that most Ph.D. students don't get.”

Workshop feedback from survey (Was it was helpful?—94% said yes, and in what way?):

“The workshop was well prepared. It was a challenge to prepare the policy one-pager.”

“I felt that Rob and Julie really focused their presentations on very practical, how-to sorts of skills.”

“The simple approach using 3 talking points with 3 transitions between each of them [was very helpful].”

“I learned how to package my pitch in an explicit and concise manner.”

“Getting personal feedback about how to improve my presentation so it had maximum impact [was helpful].”

“Learning what to expect in conversations with Congress people [was helpful].”

“There were a lot of gems of information for communicating with the media and with Congress.”

“The workshop was extremely helpful in my Hill meetings. In particular, I liked preparing what I was going to say based on the communication triangle, and being told that repeating myself would be helpful. It was also helpful that we were told that the conversation could stray and that we'd have to steer the attention back to our main message.”

“The way we delivered our message and tried to keep the conversation focused on our message was learned in the workshop. The workshop also prepared us for what to expect in the Hill meetings which was helpful and made me feel more at ease about the meetings.”

Congressional briefing feedback from survey (Was the policy briefing helpful?—100% said yes)

“It was good to see how prominent scientists present ecosystem research for a general audience.”

“Good to see the level of staffer attendance.”

“I thought it was insightful to see what staffers actually took notes on.”

“It was helpful to hear what questions the staffers asked because it helped me figure out what types of information intrigued them.”

“I felt like we were making a direct impact on policy.”

“It was very helpful to see how policy briefings are done.”

“I do believe I used a few insights I gained at the briefing later in my Congressional visits.”

Capitol Hill congressional office visits feedback from survey (50% of respondents took part; How did the meetings go?)

“Very well. The staff members were very receptive to our messages.”

“Overall, the meetings went well, and the staffers seemed genuinely interested in what we had to say.”

“Overall they went well. One staffer started off disinterested, but there was a point where I was able to get her excited about our meeting by suggesting that she visit our field site.”

“I noticed that the more senior the staffer, the more detail-oriented the questions I was asked about my research.”

“[The workshop] was useful to start thinking about how to distill the message, but actually going to the [Hill] meeting[s] with someone [who] had done it before was the most useful part for the Hill meetings.”

We also received very good suggestions from participants about how we might go about improving the training experiences for participants of next year’s events. The AERC Board members want to offer a similar program next year, and we look forward to increasing graduate student and postdoc participation in the operation of the AERC, particularly our Web site. The complete 2013 Annual DC Event evaluation designed and conducted by Ph.D. graduate students and AERC members and event participants, Susan Cheng (University of Michigan) and Alex Maestre (University of Alabama), will be posted on the AERC Web site soon (www.ecosystemresearch.org).

I hope this letter has given you a feeling for the excitement that this year’s AERC events in Washington DC generated among all who participated. This year’s meetings were particularly poignant for me because I came away with the profound conviction that these AERC activities truly do have the real potential to reach our respective congressional representatives in a way that can ultimately result in improved funding for ecosystem research.

This is why your annual dues support is so important and why I want to thank you once again for enabling us to promote increased funding for research that will benefit all of us.

I wish you a happy holiday season and a good start to 2014!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John Arnone III". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

John (“Jay”) A. Arnone III
AERC President