

PROFILES OF SCIENTISTS IN EDUCATION AND PUBLIC OUTREACH

This profile is based on excerpts of an interview of Dr. William van der Veen about his involvement in Education and Public Outreach (E/PO), specifically his work in creating the Project ASTRO NOVA program. Dr. Cherilynn Morrow (Space Science Institute – SSI) designed the interview questionnaire. SSI’s Christy Edwards and Preston Dyches edited the interview in November, 2002.



Current Professional position:

I'm a Associate Adjunct Research Scientist at Columbia University. My research is focused on stellar evolution as well as galactic structure and evolution.

Description of Wil's featured E/PO role:

I am the coordinator of Project ASTRO NOVA, the New Jersey member of the national network of Project ASTRO sites. Project ASTRO NOVA's goal is to create at least 25 partnerships between amateur or professional astronomers and teachers in grades 2-12 each year. As the program coordinator, I recruit volunteer astronomers and teachers and facilitate cooperation between them. I organize two-day training workshops for these partners, where they meet and learn about the Project ASTRO philosophy and goals, engage in hands-on inquiry-based astronomy activities, and plan their school year program together. Astronomers visit the same class or youth group at least four times over the course of the school year. During the year I am the primary contact for the astronomers and teachers and organize follow-up events and workshops.

How he got involved in Project ASTRO NOVA:

I first read about Project ASTRO in the AAS Newsletter in 1996. I wanted to get involved as a volunteer astronomer visiting classrooms, but when I found out there was no Project ASTRO site in or near New York/New Jersey, I started looking for an institution that would be interested in starting such a program. I met Jerry Vinski, the director of the planetarium at Raritan Valley Community College, and in 1998 we were awarded an NSF sub-grant to start the New Jersey site.

Comments on his time commitment:

My time commitment to this project is about 15 hours per week on average, which includes presenting at follow-up workshops, fundraising, attending local and national meetings etc.

Challenges to his E/PO involvement:

The biggest challenge has been to find funding. Although it only costs ~\$25,000 per year to run Project ASTRO it has been a struggle to raise the money. We have had some fundraising successes but also many disappointments. My past experience in writing research grants has been a good preparation.

What he gets out of his participation:

Although it was initially not my intention to run the program, when the opportunity arose, I thought it would be a worthwhile and interesting experience. Indeed, I can say that the five years I have been involved with Project ASTRO have been extremely satisfying. I have learned many new skills and I am quite proud of what I have helped create.

Because Project ASTRO is supported by an extensive local coalition of professional astronomy departments, amateur astronomy clubs, museums and educational organizations, I made many new connections, and I never expected that. People often call me now if they need a speaker for their club or star parties or need to get in contact with someone else for their E/PO efforts.

The most rewarding for me has been the individual letters and cards from teachers and students that I have received over the years. The anecdotal stories they tell shows me the enormous and lasting impact Project ASTRO and other E/PO programs are making in the lives of many children and adults.

His most important contribution to the program:

As a scientist I always try to point out what it is that scientists really do or how they think. The people I work with running Project ASTRO NOVA and my co-presenters at astronomy workshops are mostly astronomy educators. They know a lot about astronomy and education but they are not trained as scientists and don't think like them.

Wil's words of wisdom about E/PO:

My important recommendation is: try it.

Visit the Project ASTRO website at:

www.astrosociety.org/education/astro/project_astro.html