PROFILES OF SCIENTISTS IN EDUCATION AND PUBLIC OUTREACH

This profile is based on excerpts of an interview of Astronomy Professor and Museum Curator ***Dr. Laura Danly,*** *about her involvement in Education and Public Outreach (E/PO), specifically her role in developing the Space Odyssey project at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. 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 have a joint appointment between Denver University where I am an Assistant Professor of Physics and Astronomy, and the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS) where I am the Curator of Space Science. At the University, I am a regular old professor; at the museum I am the scientist participating in the development of the new *Space Odyssey* exhibit and its attendant programs.

Description of Laura's featured E/PO role:
I provide the scientific vision and expertise for a major space science project at DMNS. I work in concert with exhibit designers, educators, fund-raisers, and marketing and media specialists. I also provide links to the research community and bring in speakers, consultants, and other resources to enhance what we do. I have some proposal writing and other fund-raising activities, and some media contact as well.

How she got involved in the Space Odyssey project:
I was contacted by someone from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, and the job was too wonderful to pass up.
I liked the joint appointment aspect (though I know there have been some difficulties in other places establishing such a position) and I wanted to try to work out the demands of the two environments.

How she balances her E/PO effort with other professional activities:
It is extremely difficult to keep the balance. Although it is very demanding, there's so much to be gained by such a partnership! I spend about 40 hours a week on E/PO and about 30 hours a week on my teaching and research as a professor. -- Yes, I'm a workaholic, but I love what I do! -- It took about a year and a half to get settled into the E/PO and teaching routine here, during which time I got no research done. However, I just submitted a review paper, so I feel I am coming into better balance now.

Challenges to her E/PO involvement:
It's a little hard to be the only scientist on a project with 15 educators, exhibit developers and designers. Sometimes I ask them to imagine they're one designer, say, in a room of 15 scientists. That helps!

I also find a lot of educators and managers have preconceptions about scientists: that we're obscure and hard to understand, that we are left-brain-only thinkers, and that we couldn't possibly understand what the public desires or needs. We all have so much to learn about one another, and I have worked earnestly to establish a base of greater mutual understanding and respect with my museum colleagues.

I was particularly surprised to find that a small minority of museum professionals viewed space science as a hardware-oriented offshoot of the Cold War military industrial complex -- what a shock that was! I arrived all set to share the beauty and wonder of the Cosmos, so that was quite a surprise!

What she gets out of her participation:
E/PO is fun, rewarding, and you meet interesting people. It is tremendously satisfying to see the excitement in the eyes of audiences, both children and adult, when they grasp some fantastic concept that they didn't understand before. Also, as a scientist supported by public funds, I feel strongly that E/PO is the right thing to do!!

Laura's words of wisdom about E/PO:
I've always loved astronomy and believed it is for everyone and understandable by everyone. Communicating science to broad audiences feels so RIGHT to me. Active scientists can help show the dynamic nature of scientific discovery and keep the information fresh and alive. They can help let the real world of science drive what public and school audiences experience.