



Public Policy Review

By Sharon Megdal

Applied Outreach Strategies, a Priority in Awarding UA Distinguished Outreach Professorship



I was very pleased to be notified in mid-March that I am to receive the highest University of Arizona honor for outreach and will officially be awarded the title University Distinguished Outreach Professor at the Winter 2010 Commencement. The nomination submission included a letter of nomination, several outside supporting letters, and a personal description of my approach to

outreach and scholarship along with documentation. Following are edited and abbreviated portions of my personal statement entitled “Improving the environment and quality of lives through research-based outreach and education on water management and policy.”

My life work has focused on questions related to public policy and how government can better meet its policy objectives. My training as an economist and my life experiences provide the analytical framework and background for my scholarly activity at the UA. My work, which focuses on the water management and policy challenges that confront communities, integrates the local, regional, state and global communities in a multi-directional fashion. My research, teaching and outreach are fully integrated and designed to evaluate policy practices and options, with the goal of improving practices in order to resolve water management challenges.

This integration is fundamental to my outreach practices. I regularly educate individuals who come from many different backgrounds, teaching them about water management practices and challenges. I accomplish this through participation in many types of local, regional, state, national and international forums. Knowledge alone is not sufficient for effective outreach. Effective communication and the sharing of knowledge require truly caring about connecting — engaging — with the audience. Not only do I speak to audiences, but also I empower them to learn more. In addition to the primary subject matter, I provide useful references and resources. I often make connections that are useful building blocks to carrying out and/or obtaining funding for my research programs.

Because outreach programs that effectively share knowledge and information should not be limited to presentations I conduct personally, I have endeavored to provide successful forums for others to engage with those knowledgeable about water management, both as scholars and practitioners. Since joining the Water Resources Research Center in 2002, I have planned and presided over seven successful statewide water conferences. These conferences, which have become a signature product of the WRRC, provide a unique opportunity for individuals of many different perspectives and professions to meet in Arizona to discuss a water matter/challenge of statewide importance.

I initiated the WRRC’s successful Brown Bag Seminar series, whose audiences are about evenly split between the UA community and the broader community. The WRRC Brown Bag seminar series

and annual conference reflect my belief that connecting researchers, policy makers, students and the public will result in better understanding of water management issues and thereby lead ultimately to better policy outcomes.

I am very much involved in outreach when training future generations about water management and policy sustainability by teaching the graduate level course Arizona Water Policy, which I have taught each spring since 2005. I offer the students a policy-based course of instruction that brings high level policy makers into the classroom. The benefits to this are two-way. The students benefit from the expertise of the guest lecturers; the guest lecturers appreciate the opportunity to interact with the graduate students. Guest presentations are connected to class readings, and the connections often extend to the students’ research papers. I see a significant impact of my ability to connect course instruction and research with real world water managers and policy makers in the enhanced training I give to the future water and environmental leaders of Arizona, the nation and the world.

Of course, responding promptly to requests for information, which often involves knowledge acquired through research, is a fundamental aspect of my outreach, as is my involvement in WRRC publications. When I joined the WRRC in early 2002, I started this public policy column. I’ve not missed a single issue, this being column number 43. Resuming annual publication in 2007 of the *Arroyo* after a five-year hiatus is another example of my desire to take research findings and UA knowledge to the broader community. (I am gratified that the just released *Arroyo* on the water energy nexus, written by WRRC staff and a student intern, has already generated very positive feedback.)

I try to contribute to policy making through research based outreach. On my own initiative or on request, I have undertaken analytical studies that connect my academic training and real world experiences. Outreach is sometimes part of my research methodology. Several of my projects have involved interviews of water policy and management professionals, decision makers, and representatives of the business community, NGOs, and the public. In addition, my work on environmental preservation and enhancement has involved significant outreach, as has my international work related to the Middle East and to the U.S. Mexico border.

My 2008 election to a six-year term on the Board of Directors of the Central Arizona Project demonstrates how my public service complements and is therefore integral to what I do at the UA. I use my expertise to reach out and actively engage in making water policy and managing our precious Colorado River water. In the process, I gather information and make contacts useful to my research, teaching and outreach activities.

Working to make a difference through outreach is a way of life. I thank all those who work with me, and I sincerely appreciate every thank you I receive from people and organizations I’ve touched. 