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The Ecotox Facility is part of Arkansas State University that supports ASU's Environmental Sciences Program.

Researchers scrutinize environmental programs in American academia

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO
AND MICHEL CONNER
SPECIAL FOR THE SUN

Environmental programs have flourished in colleges and universities around the world. These days it is very rare to see an academic institution of higher education that does not have a program of some sort that focuses on teaching students some aspects of the environment.

Last year the two authors of this article launched a study about these environmental programs in the United States and found some interesting data and trends that can help administrators in colleges and universities better understand how these programs operate and what kind of trends there are.

We surveyed 1,055 environmental programs and/or departments nationwide and found that the states with the highest number of those programs or departments were New York (100), Pennsylvania (92), California (76), Ohio (56) and Massachusetts (55), while those with the lowest numbers were Arkansas, Oklahoma and Utah (4), Delaware (3), Hawaii, South Dakota and Wyoming (2), North Dakota (1) and Idaho (0).

However, when the state population is taken into account and the number of programs per 1,000,000 inhabitants is calculated, the results vary greatly for the ones that were at the top in absolute numbers, but remain basically the same for those that were at the bottom in absolute numbers. For example, the states with the highest number of programs or departments per 1,000,000 inhabitants are Vermont (30.495), the District of Columbia (17.165), Montana (16.031), Maine (15.134), Alaska (15.068) and Rhode Island (10.221), and at the bottom we found Idaho (0), Oklahoma (1.127), Arkansas (1.439), Texas (1.487), Florida (1.518), Hawaii (1.568), North Dakota (1.571) and Utah (1.620).

Program emphasis

It was also interesting to find that the emphasis of programs varied greatly, but most of them tend to be highly interdisciplinary in

nature with the majority calling themselves either "Environmental Science" or "Environmental Studies" (57.01 percent) followed by those focused on environmental engineering (11.08 percent), biology-ecology-conservation (8.43 percent) and policy-analysis-planning (6.82 percent).

Even more interesting was to find out when and why these programs were created at all: between 1900 (the year the first program was created) and 1958, only 14 programs were established. For the period of 1959-99, there is a dramatic increase in the number of programs.

There are two big peaks in the creation of programs: one between 1965 and 1976 and another starting in 1988 and, probably, continuing to this date, with a peak in 1997. Representatives of the programs surveyed cited students and faculty demand and job market opportunities as the most common reasons behind the creation of these programs.

For example, we noticed that most programs were created around 1970, the same year that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established. That was also a year of high profile for environmental issues such as the enacting of the Clean Air Act, the creation of the League of Conservation Voters and the first year celebrating Earth Day. The combination of the impression of the availability of jobs in this area, together with high profile publicity around environmental issues may have led many colleges and universities to create environmental academic programs.

These and other data will be a topic of discussion during the World Environmental Summit that will take place at Arkansas State University in May and include representatives from dozens of colleges and universities from around the world.

For more information, contact the Arkansas State University Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

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