

Students in Dialog about Water

Objective

As part of the USDA Grant *Moving Forward on Agricultural Water Conservation in the Colorado River Basin* we conducted dialogs with students about water conflict during a four-week short-course. The overall objective was to investigate current conflicts over water in the Western United States including the various interests and positions of stakeholders. Core competencies developed in this course included: skills to manage conflict through collaboration, the ability to relate to others with diverse opinions and backgrounds about water, the ability to understand different stakeholder perspectives such as agricultural, urban, and environmental.

Background

Students learned about the facilitation work going on at the Colorado Water Institute when MaryLou Smith, Policy Specialist at the Colorado Water Institute, was a guest speaker in a class for the School of Global Environmental Sustainability. After the class, two students approached her requested an opportunity where they could learn about water conflict as it relates to conflicts between agriculture and the environment. On the spot they decided to design an informal short-course. The students were willing to take the course without credit, and to recruit other students.

Who Participated

A total of seven students participated with different backgrounds and majors including: Agriculture, Economics, Biology, Social Work, Sociology, and School of Global and Environmental Sustainability. The students also had different personal backgrounds. Three grew up on farms throughout the Front Range. One student was extremely worried about oil and gas development affecting water quality. However, her father is a petroleum engineer and she worries about his future. Other students were environmentalists and had never talked to a farmer. Therefore, we explored water through all these different value perspectives. We talked openly about values related to water and the potential to all work together. The students were incredibly invested in the course because they believe the future of water is important and we need to learn how to talk about water conflicts.

Learning Objectives

- Learn about different perspectives around contemporary water issues
- Learn basic facilitation skills such as active listening, asking questions, and collaboration that can be used in their classes, communities and professional careers.
- Develop skills for working with others who have different perspectives and backgrounds.
- Explore how value differences lead to water conflict. Students will discuss and explore value differences and similarities to reach deeper understanding.

What Happened?

The course began by exploring values and how values are often at the center of water conflicts. Students shared their values and listened to the values of others in the group. This laid the foundation to have conversations about water conflicts involving agriculture, municipalities, fish, and agriculture/urban conservation.

We invited two guest speakers John Stokes from Fort Collins Natural Areas and Dale Trowbridge from Cache le Poudre Irrigation Company. They presented their background about working together as members in the Poudre Runs Through It Study Action Work Group—a local group that brings together agricultural/environmental/urban interests to generate collaborative actions. Students then spent time asking questions about their experiences working with people who have different values and experiences. Students reported that were impressed with the two gentlemen’s ability to communicate across very different needs and values.

What Students Learned?

Students reported learning that we all want the same thing from water. We just value it differently. They were surprised how through facilitation they were able to have a civil conversation about water.

Students reported using what they learned in their classes, leadership roles, and jobs. For example three students facilitated a World Café in one of their classes about water conflicts and what could be done in the future. Another said that in the future, “I would like to be actively involved in my ditch company board.” Finally, a student said, “It changed my view of people in general – which affects my viewpoint of society as a whole. Although we have different backgrounds and beliefs structures we all want what is ‘best for the population’”

Next Steps

All students recommended repeating the course for other students. Therefore, we are planning a second session at Colorado State University where students can receive independent study credit for participating. We will also be partnering with Colorado Mesa University and perhaps others, to offer the course at their university.

