

I. Greetings from EREN's President

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Hello EREN Members,

It is still serious winter in Ohio, with snow on the ground a week ago and two-hour delays now a regular part of my son's school schedule. But, I am dreaming of summer fieldwork at our two beautiful forested nature preserves here at Ohio Wesleyan, and just got an e-mail from a student who is interested in applying to work with me on EREN projects through our Summer Science Research Program. The warm days will be here before we know it, and data collection efforts across our various EREN projects will spring to life!

In this newsletter, you too can dream about summer as you read about our plans for an EREN Ignite Session at the Ecological Society of America meetings in New Orleans in August. Also, stay tuned for an upcoming survey that will allow us to update our member database into a form that you can edit as your information changes. On a more serious note, Board Member Kathleen LoGiudice from Union College shares a summary of the Board's discussions about EREN's future – there are many paths we could take, and all have their benefits and drawbacks. If you have ideas for how EREN should evolve, please write us at erenteam@gmail.com. Finally, we finish with a spotlight on EREN Member Sara Scanga, since our people are what make our network strong and vibrant.

Stay warm, drive carefully on the icy roads, and thanks, as always, for your involvement in EREN.

Laurie Anderson
President of the EREN Board of Directors

II. EREN Upcoming Events

Ignite Session at ESA

EREN will host an Ignite session at the Ecological Society of America (ESA) Meetings in New Orleans, August 5-10, 2018. The session is titled “Ecological Research as Education Network (EREN): Multi-site Collaborative Research in the Undergraduate Classroom” and is being organized by EREN Board Members Erin Lindquist and Vikki Rodgers. The session will take place on Thursday, August 9 at 8AM.

In an Ignite Session, all presenters give 5-minute talks with slides that automatically advance every 15 seconds. This keeps the pace of session exciting and leaves more time for interaction and discussion. The EREN Ignite session will provide an overview of EREN, highlight some of the EREN projects’ research protocols and paired curriculum, and emphasize the successes and challenges to achieving the goals for each. A multi-project assessment of student learning outcomes will be discussed, and speakers will highlight ways new EREN members can participate in the current and proposed future projects. The session will conclude with a panel discussion.

EREN Members Database to be Updated

Watch your e-mail inbox for a survey from EREN requesting updated information for the EREN Members Database. Some of our members’ records are now eight years old, and members may have moved or changed their research focus. Our new database in REDCap will allow members to edit their own information in the future, but we need people to login and establish a new entry for themselves. Stay tuned for more electronic information in the coming weeks!

III. EREN at a Crossroads

By Kathleen LoGiudice, Union College, EREN Board of Directors

Since its inception eight years ago, EREN has been successful beyond most of the dreams of the founding members. NSF seed funds and a Research Coordination Network Grant (RCN) in 2010 fueled pilot projects and all-members annual meetings and helped EREN grow to a 300-plus member network. The member-led projects have produced three peer-reviewed research papers to date, with more on the way, as well as position papers and numerous presentations. Our face-to-face, all-members meetings promoted these research collaborations and carved out time to focus on data analysis and writing. The RCN officially ended in September 2016, and EREN has now spent more than a year without external funding. In advance of the end of the grant, EREN adopted formal by-laws and transitioned from the original steering committee to an elected Board of Directors. We have six new board members, and the Board has regularly met via video conference. We sponsored a well-attended brown-bag lunch at the Ecological Society of America meeting in Portland, Oregon, in 2017. A constant topic of discussion has been how to support our ongoing mission and maintain our vibrancy without funding.

Theoretically, EREN does not need a large source of funding to survive and connect small college ecologists to each other. Our needs are modest and include things like URL rental and video conferencing fees. The Board feels confident that we can sustain this. However, we recognize the value of face-to-face meetings that allow us to personally connect, brainstorm, and concentrate on our collaborative research projects without distractions or financial limitations. In exit surveys, annual meeting attendees often expressed amazement at their productivity during the short time at the meeting. We fear that without this type of focused meeting opportunity, EREN will be lost in the noise of our professional lives and will wither away.

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The Board has been examining many options to fund annual meetings. Some ideas include:

- **Become a not for profit corporation and charge membership fees on an institutional and/or personal level.** The Board feels that this could fund the basic operations of the network, but we are not convinced that we could raise enough funds to finance our important face-to-face meetings.
- **Pursue a formal affiliation with the Ecological Society of America or a professional society devoted to undergraduate research.** This would allow us to piggyback our annual meeting on the larger meeting, which should make attendance more affordable for our members, many of whom have little or no institutional support for meeting attendance. On the negative side, there is no single society meeting that all of our members regularly attend, so, by affiliating with any other group, we would make it difficult for some of our most active participants to stay involved.
- **Solicit federal funding at the network level.** A bid for another round of RCN funding has not been encouraged since the RCN program is intended to produce independently sustained enterprises. We might qualify for additional funding by substantially changing or enhancing our mission in some way, such as partnering with mathematicians or social scientists, but we also recognize that EREN has been very successful as it is and don't want to dilute the current mission or change a formula that has been working well.
- **Have individual EREN research project leaders solicit federal funding for their project and include funds to support EREN in their budgets.** Similarly, although this idea is still being considered, we realize that the demands of our undergraduate teaching positions and the low funding success for federal grants make this an unlikely savior.
- **Seek funding from foundations or other sources.** This option is under active investigation.

None of these avenues is an easy fix, but we remain committed to keeping EREN the vital organization that it has been. The Board welcomes your thoughts and ideas about how we can keep EREN funded. Please contact us at ERENteam@gmail.com.

IV. EREN Member Spotlight

Sara Scanga (<https://sarascanga.weebly.com>) is a plant ecologist and Associate Professor in the Biology Department at Utica College, where she teaches courses like general biology, research methods, botany, conservation biology, and ecology. She's been an enthusiastic member of EREN for 5 years and is currently an active participant in the Distribution of Earthworms and Milkweed Adaptation projects. She also has incorporated a modified version of the EREN Worm protocol and teaching materials into her department's general biology labs, where they are used to teach entering students about hypothesis development, experimental design, and graphical skills.

Sara earned her B.A. in Biology from Drew University in 1997 then worked as a lab technician for several years at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies and the NY Department of Health before earning her Ph.D. in Ecology at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in 2009. An NSF GK-12 Teaching Fellowship in grad school taught Sara how to build inquiry- and research-based learning into her courses. Since joining Utica College in 2010, Sara has guided over 60 different student-led research projects within her courses. Working with collaborators, she also has mentored dozens of students outside of class on research projects related to plant sensory biology and ecology, wetlands, agriculture, and ecosystems. EREN projects have played an important role in these research experiences with students, often providing a much-needed resource to students who are having trouble coming up with a project idea! As the only botanist in her department, Sara is also deeply grateful that EREN has allowed her to develop a sense of community and interesting collaborations with plant ecologists across the country.

At home, Sara enjoys time with her husband and two young sons as they play outside and work on maintaining their old farmhouse and three vegetable gardens. She is also a small-scale beekeeper, selling honey and bees locally.

