

EvoS in a Crystal Ball: Lessons from the EvoS 2012 Summit

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On October 26, 2012, a one-day conference on the state of evolutionary studies in higher education was held at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Most of the participants had connections to the Evolutionary Studies (EvoS) Consortium that was created with the help of NSF funding during 2008-10, using programs previously established at Binghamton University and SUNY New Paltz as models (<http://evostudies.org>).

The purpose of the EvoS Consortium is to expand evolutionary training beyond the biological sciences to include traditional human-related subjects that have not been confined to biology departments. Historically, evolutionary thought developed more or less continuously in the biological sciences but experienced a case of arrested development in relation to human affairs. A renewed effort to rethink human-related disciplines from an evolutionary perspective didn't gather steam until the late 20th century. It is currently in full swing at the level of research and scholarship, but it is not yet reflected in the curriculum of most colleges and universities, where evolution is still taught primarily as a biological subject.

An EvoS program attempts to solve this problem by creating a curriculum that can be taken by any student in parallel with his or her traditional major. In the process, faculty who are approaching their respective disciplines from an evolutionary perspective become organized into a single intellectual community, which provides a resource for faculty, especially in the human-related disciplines, who did not receive evolutionary training during their own higher education.

The need for a campus-wide evolutionary studies program that reaches both students and faculty is documented by a survey of scientists who are the forefront of the human behavioral and brain sciences from an evolutionary perspective (Glass, Wilson, & Geher, 2012). Most received little formal evolutionary training and were forced to train themselves, often after they received their PhDs. They evaluated the

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situation at their current institutions as little better than when they were students. Given the conservative nature of most academic institutions, decades might be required for faculty training and the undergraduate curriculum to catch up with current research and scholarship. An EvoS program catalyzes the process.

The basic purpose of an EvoS program can be accomplished in various ways. For example, at Binghamton it took the form of a certificate program, while at New Paltz it took the form of a minor. However, most EvoS programs are well advised to include three core features: 1) An introductory course that teaches the relevance of evolution to the human-related disciplines in addition to the biological sciences from the beginning; 2) a menu of courses that teach evolution across the curriculum with appropriate distribution requirements; and 3) a campus-wide seminar series that provides a flow of external speakers, so that faculty and students alike can witness how evolution is providing a unifying theoretical framework across disciplines at the level of cutting-edge research and scholarship.

NSF funding during 2008-10 enabled the EvoS concept to be developed at Binghamton and New Paltz and to be publicized through seminars, symposia at society meetings, the EvoS Consortium Website, and numerous publications, including a special issue of *Evolution: Education and Outreach* (2011, v4, no 1) in addition to our own online *EvoS Journal* (<http://evostudies.org/evos-journal/about-the-journal/>). Most important, groups of faculty at over fifty colleges and universities were motivated to begin EvoS programs of their own. The EvoS 2012 Summit provided an opportunity to take stock of their progress and to learn from both successes and failures. This special edition of *EvoS Journal* makes this experience available to a broader audience.

We would like to offer a few general observations, based on our experience with our own EvoS programs and the presentations at the Summit. First, EvoS courses tend to be highly popular among undergraduate students, who report that evolution provides a unifying theoretical framework, in contrast to non-EvoS courses that do not offer a comparable framework. This is true at the single-course level and even more for a multi-course curriculum program. Few EvoS courses or programs fail for lack of student interest.

Second, when an incipient EvoS program experiences difficulty getting established, it is sometimes for reasons that make *any* academic program difficult to establish—the faculty are too busy, too much Administrative red tape, all trans-disciplinary programs have special challenges, and so on.

Third, other challenges are more specific to an evolutionary studies program per se. The stigma attached to evolution in relation to human affairs during the first half of the 20th century still lingers, especially in cultural anthropology and humanities departments. Some incipient EvoS programs have even encountered resistance from faculty in the biological sciences, who feel proprietorial about the teaching of evolution!

Despite these challenges, a number of full-fledged EvoS programs have developed and have proven highly rewarding to their participants. In addition, the EvoS consortium provides resources to faculty and students who do not yet have EvoS programs at their institutions. We look forward to expanding evolutionary training across the curriculum in higher education, both at the single-course and

programmatic levels. There is no doubt that higher education will catch up with current research and scholarship. The only question is when.

REFERENCES

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