CSU’s Conservation Leadership Through Learning Wins Top Award for Graduate Education Excellence and Innovation

Fort Collins – A Colorado State University program is being recognized for its outstanding contributions to graduate education. The Conservation Leadership Through Learning master’s program has been awarded the Western Association of Graduate Schools Award for Excellence and Innovation in Graduate Education.

The annual award is given to one university each year and recognizes outstanding contributions to graduate education based on the criteria of excellence, innovation and significance. CLTL, a program of CSU’s Warner College of Natural Resources’ Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, was formally recognized with the award at the annual WAGS conference in Tucson, Ariz. this week. As a part of the recognition, CLTL received a grant to support graduate recruitment, admissions, and retention programs.

CLTL’s mission is to train and inspire future conservation leaders to be adaptive change makers and empower them to make meaningful contributions toward real environmental challenges facing societies. The graduate program’s hallmark is its unique integration of comprehensive conservation curriculum; systems-thinking approach; problem-based, experiential and cross-cultural learning; and training in leadership, management, communication, and collaboration skills.

CLTL was launched in August 2010 with the support of Colorado State and donors Cox Kennedy and Ying Lee, who believed the program's innovative approach would make a global impact. The program was envisioned to be a collaborative, adaptive educational model designed to respond to the changing needs of environmental employers. It was jointly developed and staffed by a diverse team of 25 faculty and administrators from CSU and partnering EcoSur University in Mexico, as well as multiple workforce partners from government agencies and conservation NGOs.

The program’s development was led by Department Head Mike Manfredo, Assistant Professor and inaugural CLTL Director Josh Goldstein, CLTL Co-Director Ryan Finchum, and Associate Professor and Warner College Associate Dean of Academics Peter Newman, all with CSU’s Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources. The team spent two years working with collaborative partners across campus and asking conservation employers what they wanted from new graduates. The result was a new education model that aligned graduates’ experience and knowledge with real-world conservation and the complexity of creating solutions for environmental issues.

“We are thrilled that our efforts to create an innovative and incredibly effective graduate program in conservation leadership has been recognized with this wonderful award,” said Rick Miranda Provost and Executive Vice President of CSU. “It is heartening that our strong efforts in collaborative and deep thinking about curriculum and learning has had such great results. Congratulations to all our colleagues in Human Dimensions of Natural Resources!”

Partnership with Mexico
The program’s first two-year cohort was a joint international program between Colorado State University and El Colegio de la Frontera Sur, Mexico. The cohort spent its first year on the CSU campus in Fort Collins completing intensive curriculum to understand and integrate technical knowledge across ecological and social sciences, contextualize “big picture” conservation issues, and identify potential solutions. During the second year,
students studied in Mexico and were challenged with identifying a priority conservation issue and developing a pragmatic tool or solution that could be implemented to help the community where they were studying.

“From the start, CLTL was about looking where we had been, collaborating with some of the best minds from across campus, and inventing a new way of preparing students as conservation leaders - to think differently, embrace complexity, and see the human and environmental conditions of conservation as one intricate system,” said Manfredo. “Because of Warner College’s 100-year legacy of leadership and its strong partnerships in the conservation community, we were able to create a strong learning network of students, professors, and professionals that is making a difference in the world of conservation.”

CLTL’s study abroad component immerses students in conservation work, and helps them refine how they apply classroom knowledge and skills to work toward solutions that can have global impact. It also broadens students’ understanding of the diversity of people, cultures, and ecological contexts in which conservation occurs globally, and reinforces hands-on training in leadership, management, and communication skills critical to conservation career success.

CLTL’s international integration is instilled beyond its study abroad component and into the very culture of the cohort, with 11 of the first 21 students coming from outside the U.S. Operating with the insight that students often learn as much from each other as they do from instructors, CLTL worked hard to recruit and retain a diverse student body related to gender, academic background, professional experience, nationality, and personal history.

**Strong learning community**

Another factor that helped CLTL win the graduate education innovation award is its holistic approach to serving students’ needs. The program’s intensity and cohort structure develops a strong learning community that fosters two-way learning and mentoring between students, faculty, and practitioners. Even after graduation, the program provided support for job search, career mentoring, and facilitating conversations with students about important continuing innovations in conservation theory and practice. In its first year, CLTL had 100 percent graduation success rate, and more than 75 percent of participants graduated with next steps for their careers in place.

“I was drawn to CLTL by the promise of an innovative graduate experience that would help me leverage my ability to change the world. That is exactly what I got,” said CLTL alumnus August Ritter III. “CLTL is packed with field experiences, networking opportunities, and amazing classes that make it a one-of-a-kind graduate program. This new educational approach prepared me for the challenges I face every day in the fast-paced world of corporate sustainability.”

The 2014, the program is expanding its study abroad options to include Peru, New Zealand, and Kenya. In addition to expanding its international program partnerships, CLTL plans to continue adapting to and learning from its experiences to stay at the forefront of graduate education. The program also hopes to develop a strong scholarship fund to continue to attract high-performing, diverse students who will help enrich the program and drive its continued success.

“CLTL has set an incredible foundation for an innovative, collaborative education model that is changing the way people think about conservation leadership,” said Joyce Berry, dean of the Warner College of Natural Resources. “The Warner College is dedicated to natural resource excellence, and we look forward to seeing this program grow and its graduates go on to be outstanding leaders in the field of conservation.”