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Professor Errol E. Meidinger Leads Interdisciplinary Institute

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Several years in the making, the Environment and Society Institute just celebrated its first anniversary — an outstanding example of the power of interdisciplinary thinking at the university level.

ESI’s mission is to promote environmental research, but this is no ivory-tower project: Its director, Law School Professor Errol E. Meidinger, emphasizes that the institute focuses on helping to resolve community environmental problems.

“Individual disciplines often have a hard time making meaningful contributions to environmental policy on their own,” Meidinger said. “If we are going to make progress, we are going to have to cross boundaries and really work together.

For example, he said, in tackling an issue of groundwater contamination, one might call in a geologist — but then lack the expertise in law and tax policy that would lead to a comprehensive solution to the problem. Another example would be the continuing problem of pollution in the Great Lakes. “We regulate water discharges of various kinds,” Meidinger noted. “But 30 to 40 percent of pollutants fall out of the air in the form of acid rain or just particulates. When we set up the system of environmental laws, we established water and air pollution controls separately. But this segmented approach can not fully address the problem.”

More than 100 UB faculty members have affiliated with the institute, including faculty from such diverse areas as structural engineering, geology, chemistry, biology, geography, pharmacology, toxicology and planning. A nine-member steering committee sets institute policy. Funded with a small allocation from the University provost, the institute hopes to bolster its finances with outside funding.

Meidinger, whose teaching load includes environmental law courses (and whose office decor includes a stuffed Lorax, the famous environmentally aware Dr. Seuss character), notes that such an interdisciplinary approach should already be familiar to lawyers working on environmental issues. Attorneys often work with specialists such as engineers and toxicologists, he says. “We are preparing law students to work in this way and we are preparing people in other fields to work with lawyers.”

Additionally, he said, environmental law is at a crossroads, and interdisciplinary efforts such as ESI may help make the law more effective. “We have had almost 30 years of modern environmental law,” Meidinger said, “and although it has achieved a lot, it is time to take a look at the system itself. We cannot do that from within the statutes. At present we have a very fragmented system of environmental law. We need a dialogue with environmental health professionals, especially ecologists and environmental scientists of all kinds.”

Among the institute’s stated goals are: to provide fellowships to promising graduate students; to develop and maintain a Web page (already up at www.buffalo.edu/~esi); to host major events such as conferences (see the related story on page 24, “Love Canal Revisited”); to develop major interdisciplinary research proposals; and to conduct Environmental Management Alternatives Program (EMAP) projects that bring interdisciplinary working groups to bear on community problems and seek workable solutions to them.

Three such EMAP projects are already under way:

• A study has been launched toward establishing a non-profit entity to redevelop chemically contaminated “brownfields.” UB Law Professor Robert S. Berger is one leader of this study, and Professor Thomas F. Disare is a participant. “This involves complicated legal
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"When we are trying to do is work in partnerships with people in the community," Meidinger said. "We want to get away from the old model of 'you bring us a problem, we will supply the answer.'" Establishing the Environment and Society Institute brings UB into the company of such universities as Duke, Michigan, Colorado State, Oregon State and the University of California at Davis, all of which have made strides toward promoting interdisciplinary research on environmental issues. "The University is becoming a place to bring together people with different streams of knowledge," Meidinger said. "To the best of our ability, we want to see the institute contribute to solving policy problems. We want to support research that is relevant to regional policy issues.

"UB Law alumni can help the effort," Meidinger said, "by making us aware of projects and cases that could benefit from the institute's involvement. UB clearly has the potential to be one of the top universities in New York State with respect to the environment."

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