THE WORKING WATERFRONT

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Article

Students say goodbye to CREST

by Cherie Galyean

After five years, thousands of students, and over 40 community-based projects, the Community for Rural Education Stewardship and Technology project, CREST, is winding down. The $2 million National Science Foundation-funded Island Institute program, part of the Information Technology Experiences for Students & Teachers (ITEST) initiative, has spent the past five years linking classroom technology with community needs while improving the learning experience for both student and teachers in the process.

ITEST grants are intended to address the projected demand for technology professionals by increasing student and teacher interest in technology-related careers. The premise behind CREST is simple: train students and teachers to use a variety of technologies, including GIS, web design, and digital storytelling, and then allow students to design projects that use those skills and address real community needs and questions. Student projects ranged from creating ABC books about island landmarks to trail mapping for local land trusts and multi-layered historical and ethnographic research. CREST partnered with 16 schools from Cumberland to Lubec and reached 300 students and teachers directly, with up to 3,000 students benefiting indirectly through new curriculum and school experiences. Teachers and students worked with 75 community organizations, including historical societies, land trusts, municipalities, and an ATV club. Each summer the Institute held training institutes to help refine the technology and leadership skills that would benefit their school projects. Despite the needed focus on technology, those who were involved say it wasn't even the most important part.

"The technology is the hook," explains Ruth Kermish-Allen, education director at the Island Institute. "The students are digital natives, so that piece is easy for them. We can then use that to link them to their community." Todd West, principal at Deer Isle-Stonington High School agrees, "Students in this day and age are interested in anything with a screen. The technology component raised their interest and gave them the connections." In Deer Isle-Stonington's case, those connections led to an in-depth look at the "Deer Isle Boys," two groups of turn-of-the-20th-century America's Cups racing crews that came from the island. That historical society collaboration grew to encompass interviews, historical research and a trip to Spain to meet America's Cup racers. Other students mapped the locations of Deer Isle granite around the country and worked with the local lobster hatchery to map habitat. "The level of projects and the technical skills the students brought to them were really professional grade," say Kim Larsen, an English teacher at the high school.

But what came easily for students was often challenging for teachers.

Larsen, who had been teaching for 20 years when she joined the CREST team, admits that she had little knowledge of technology when she began the program. Kermish-Allen found that to be true of many, "I

remember one teacher who hardly knew how to use a mouse at the first CREST institute. Now, although the computers aren't her right arm, she welcomes technology. She's coming up with her own technology-based classroom projects." To help bridge the gap in the classroom, the Institute began a CREST student trainer program, which brought in the students to assist the summer technology trainers and help teach the classes. "The technology helped teachers and communities see the students as resources," says Kermish-Allen. "They were teaching their teachers."

For Deer Isle-Stonington High School, the project helped the school move in a new direction. "When we started CREST, we had just instituted a new strategic plan," says West. "CREST met almost every aspect of that plan. It was project-based, involved teacher collaborations, and reached out into the community. During our recent accreditation hearing, CREST was held up as an example of one of our strengths."

Although it is too early to tell what impact the CREST program may have on the career choices of involved students, anecdotal evidence suggests that a good number are indeed furthering their studies in technology at college. This is especially true of those who participated in the more advanced student trainer program: all of those students are majoring in a related discipline.

Ultimately, the impact of the program lies in the changed habits of teachers and students. West notes that his teachers are interested in maintaining the ability to work together outside of their regular classroom subjects and Deer Isle-Stonington intends to continue with a CREST "phase two." Even better, "80% of participating teachers are now using technology daily in the classroom," says Kermish-Allen. "It now naturally occurs to them to turn to it in their teaching. That's what will keep the basic goals alive."

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