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NSF, MU Chemistry Program Combines Science with Current News

By Kathryn Jones

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Questions such as "Why should I care?" or "How is this going to help me on the test?" can be frustrating for teachers eager to get students involved in math and science. University of Missouri-Columbia Professor Rainer Glaser is tackling this dilemma with Chemistry is in the News (CIITN), an innovative teaching program that relates chemistry to current events in the real world.

"The average age of people watching the evening news is 60," said Glaser, professor of chemistry. "The significant thing is that most decisions have a science issue at the core. You have to understand science to understand the issue, and most people get their science from the news."

Working in groups of four or five, the students choose a topic such as global warming, stem cell research or pharmaceuticals. Students research their topic with online news articles and other resources available on the Internet. Each group creates a news portfolio to be reviewed by other groups. The program goes global through collaboration with chemistry professors Susan Schelbe from the University of Colorado-Denver and Uri Zoller from the University of Haifa, Israel, as students peer evaluate across campuses.

Initially funded by the UM System and continuously supported by MU-IATS, CIITN now is a major initiative of the National Science Foundation. Glaser's team is working to disseminate the program to higher-learning institutions across the nation and around the world. The team includes Zhengyu Wu, graduate student in chemistry; Kathleen Carson, graduate student in the College of Education; Brian Hodgen, research assistant in chemistry; and John Sui, graduate student in chemistry.

"Today, most political, economic, and consumer decisions involve science at the core," Glaser said. "Even if you're not a chemist, you need to know about the basic concepts underlying these issues to understand how they impact your life."

Glaser and his team have written numerous articles about CIITN and will give four presentations at the American Chemistry Society National Meeting in August in an effort to get more professors interested in this innovative teaching initiative.

"There is no doubt in my mind that this project is a good thing, but implementation has been very hard," Glaser said. "Most of the students want to just read facts out of their textbooks. They don't want to take it to a broader level of understanding. However, you don't make advancements with facts; you only make advancements with insight. The real payoff is the satisfaction you get when you understand something on more than one level."

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