

Excellence in Teaching

Carolyn Menke

Biology



About me

I grew up in northern California, and did my undergraduate work in Plant Biology at the University of California at Davis (B.S. 1999). I took a year off before going to graduate school and used the time for research and travel in Australia and New Zealand, then returned to do fieldwork in Washington's North Cascades. I next came to Oregon State University for graduate school, and my master's research focused on the relationships of fire and exotic species to a rare plant on the Idaho side of Hell's Canyon.

Teaching before I came to WOU

None! I was fresh out of graduate school, where I was a Teaching Assistant for 2 ½ years, but had no professional teaching experience. Western is a fantastic place to start, and I have really enjoyed the past three years here.

Teaching philosophy

I teach exclusively non-majors science classes, and this target group of students has shaped my teaching philosophy. I always try to make information as relevant to my students as possible. In my experience, it is easier for students to learn material if they can somehow relate the information to themselves or to something familiar from their everyday world. Is this difficult to do when talking about different phyla in kingdom fungi or the chemical reactions of photosynthesis.... sometimes, but it can be done! Even though the topics are not in my research field, I really enjoy teaching about genetics, human anatomy and physiology. It is fun to get all sorts of questions from students as their curiosity gets revved up over how their own DNA and bodies work.

My Research

I am a plant ecologist. This means that I study plants, in some cases individual plant species, and in others entire communities of plants, and that I do a lot of statistics. I work with a group of botanists at the Institute for Applied Ecology (IAE) in Corvallis (<http://www.appliedeco.org>), and do field research in the summer, and data analysis in the fall, winter and spring while I'm teaching. IAE is a not-for-profit organization devoted to research, conservation of native plant species and habitats, and education. We hire college student interns each summer to work on numerous projects monitoring sensitive plant species throughout Oregon, Washington and even into British Columbia. One of my favorite projects is working on Greene's Mariposa Lily (*Calochortus greenei*) on the Cascade Siskiyou National Monument in southern Oregon. I just started a new project closer to home; we will be writing a habitat conservation plan for all of Benton County. The goal of the project is to determine where populations of sensitive species and quality native habitat exist in the county, then decide the best way to conserve these important natural features. We will also try to restore lower-quality pieces of habitat and re-introduce populations of sensitive plant species to them.



Photo of *Calochortus greenei*

What do I like to do other than work?

I love rock climbing, running, gardening (especially with native plants) and cooking. My husband and I like to go on climbing trips, especially when it means we'll get some sunshine during Oregon's rainy season. We just spent an incredible spring break in New Mexico and southern Utah, and were in Joshua Tree in southern California over Christmas.



Fieldwork in southern Oregon with college-student interns



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