

President-Elect: Kevin Williams

Biography

Kevin Williams is an Associate Professor in the Earth Sciences and Science Education department at Buffalo State College (SUNY). He teaches introductory courses in geology and space science as well as upper division courses in geologic surface processes and planetary geology.

Kevin earned his B.A. in Astronomy and Physics from Boston University, his M.A. in Earth and Planetary Science from Johns Hopkins University, and his Ph.D. in Planetary Geology and Remote Sensing from Arizona State University. He then spent four years as a post-doctoral research scientist at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum before starting at Buffalo State in 2006. Kevin was appointed as Director of the Whitworth Ferguson Planetarium in 2010.

Planetarium Background

Unlike many MAPS members, my involvement with planetariums is relatively recent. Instead, my background is in research and academia. In graduate school and as a post-doc, I was fortunate to work with data from robotic missions to the Moon, Mars, Venus, and Europa, and I also conducted field work in several planetary analog locations on Earth. During these experiences and especially since becoming a college professor, I have been able to share the excitement of exploration with students and the general public through classes and public events. Now as a planetarian, I am able to connect with and inspire the public on an even greater scale . . . and I love it!

Planetarium Experience

Although my appointment as Director of the Whitworth Ferguson Planetarium in March 2010 resulted from the untimely passing of Art Gielow, I was fortunate to have a staff dedicated to the success of the planetarium. After working my way up the massive learning curve, I attended my first MAPS conference and was blown away by the helpfulness, excitement, and friendliness of the MAPS members I met. Planetarium educators and vendors were always patient and more than willing to answer questions as I immersed myself more in the field. I have continued to encounter that comradery and helpful nature in the planetarium community when reaching out to others across the country either electronically or in person. From discussions with planetarium colleagues, I worked with my staff to modify the scheduling of our programs and how they were marketed. Together, we went from typical audiences of about five to selling out our 60 person capacity and needing to add more showings. Needing to close the planetarium at the end of 2012 because of construction, I pushed my staff to offer over 15 different planetarium programs during our final year in addition to two months of laser music shows. We were able to show that the planetarium is capable of bringing in and educating large crowds, which led to a major donation for our new planetarium that will enable us to purchase an opto-mechanical projector in addition to the planned digital projector.

Unfortunately, closing the planetarium left a large void after our very busy 2012. After several months of being closed and learning that completion of the building housing the new planetarium was delayed two years, I began building support for purchasing an inflatable planetarium to fill in the several years until the new planetarium opens. We are now about to begin offering public, school, and other programs again, and we will quickly fill in that void.

Statement

We are living in very exciting times! Never before have we known so much about the reaches beyond our planet: The large scale structure of the universe, incredible advances in detection of extrasolar planets, and the possible detection of dark matter. On top of that, the recent successes of Rosetta, Dawn, and Curiosity, the first test flight of the Orion capsule, and our upcoming first close look at Pluto— there are many space-related successes to be proud of but which sometimes go unknown to the public.

Planetariums can uniquely connect the public with these new discoveries, because visitors don't only read about them online or hear about them in a classroom, but they can experience and feel more connected to these advances in the immersive environment of the planetarium. I believe we can see a resurgence in planetariums and planetarium attendance if we can get the public to re-recognize the importance of having a planetarium as a resource for these exciting discoveries and events. Of course, budgets will continue to tighten, and as with many sectors of education, planetariums will need to do more, better, with less, but that is where I see MAPS playing an integral role. By strengthening the connectivity among planetariums within and beyond the MAPS region, we can help each other to take advantage of the space-related excitement, which can become overwhelming when working alone. It is especially important to renew our efforts to connect with smaller planetariums that could benefit greatly from MAPS support.

I look forward to working with the Executive Committee to continue expanding MAPS to a larger membership so that we can better help each other rise to meet these exciting times.