

PLANETARIUM OPERATIONS

A Method for Training Staff in a College Planetarium

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Looking for a way to find and train staff for your college planetarium? Try instituting a course called Planetarium Operations. My philosophy about the role of a college planetarium is that, at a university where K12 teacher preparation is part of the university's mission, the planetarium should be an educational resource to provide college students with an outlet for their creativity, and to provide relevant instructional opportunities for our pre-service teachers. Planetarium Operations, an interdisciplinary one-credit semester course, provides students with these experiences. This laboratory class meets weekly for two hours, and the course may be repeated twice for credit. The Planetarium Operations class has two objectives. One is to help students learn to operate the planetarium projector and auxiliary equipment by requiring them to present student programs. The other is to guide students into an understanding of how to create, plan, and produce a planetarium production, which, in our case, is our student-produced yearly show.

Student Programs.

New students are required to present a ten- to fifteen-minute planetarium program to the other class members. This means that they must learn how to operate the equipment as well as learn to speak to the group. The class presentation must use the planetarium projector (Spitz 512) and at least one motion function. New students, at first, are in awe of the planetarium console. To make them unafraid of breaking something, mentor students, students who know how the console operates, work with the initiates until the new students are able to "play" with the planetarium equipment on their own. Luckily, Spitz machines are indestructible. However, turning on and off slide projectors, and changing latitude isn't all that exciting after you've done it 10 or 20 times. Thus, having to produce your own program gives direction to the playing. It's fun

incorporating slides and using the projector to create your own program. And it's even more fun to see what a function does and then decide how to incorporate this into your own production. These student projects are then used as mini shows when high school students visit campus for area-wide meetings such as the Language Arts Festival, Business Activity Day, or the Science Olympiad. The planetarium students completely run their presentations and the program, and provide the university with a unique method of student recruitment. Some examples of the diversity of student mini programs are Astronomical Music of the 60s, Mood and Music, Jupiter, Moon and its Phases, Clash of the Titans, the Book of Revelations, and Medicine Wheels.

Student Produced Yearly Show.

Because we are located in a rural section of North Dakota, we have a small population base. Our planetarium programming consists of two possible selections. We offer a night sky program to the schools, and our student-produced show to the schools and general public. The production of our yearly planetarium presentation mirrors the steps the students use to create their mini program, except that the yearly presentation is on a larger scale. The first several weeks of class are spent brainstorming possible topics (as well as learning how to run the equipment). I usually start these sessions with several possible show suggestions which the class is free to accept or reject. Eventually a focus is agreed upon and the students research this topic, narrowing down what should be included in the script. I then take their ideas and produce a rough script for further discussion. Each week the script is refined until it is acceptable to the class. As the script is being finalized, students investigate possible slides and special effects for the program. We've done simple things like using blinking Christmas tree lights behind the dome to create a spaceship control panel. This year we're going to use two rheostated grain-of-wheat type bulbs installed inside the dome to simulate two stars talking to one another. These are simple ideas, but the students think they're neat. I basically write the show, although the students are responsible for segments within the show, and they may write their own material or rewrite what I have written. Humor is an important part of our presentation, and the students are fantastic at writing puns which provide comic relief to the sections, even within last year's serious production of *"Are We Alone? Is Anybody out There?"*, the search for intelligent life in the universe. This year our show is tentatively entitled *"Monster Myths and Sky Heroes"* and deals with the mythology of

Hercules, Perseus, and Orion. Of course the students get full credit for their work by having their names projected on our 24-foot dome for all to see.

Who Takes This Class?

When I came to Valley City State University, I introduced Planetarium Operations as a formal class, and it increased student participation from all disciplines across the campus. Last year the major narrators of our show were an English major and a biology major, both of whom had on-the-air radio experience. They also recorded our production at KOVC, the local radio station. An older-than-average student, a general education major, painted an original oil painting which we had duplicated for our postcard reminders which we send out to possible audience members. An English major helped work on the script. An art major and a chemistry major wrote segments of the script. This year a human resources major, who wants to be a parole officer, and a general studies major are writing much of the show. My research person is an elementary education major who just returned from serving with the Army in Somalia. We have several elementary education majors who are interested and able to present the Night Sky programs to our visiting school groups. Graduates of the Planetarium Operations classes present all of our school and public shows. The job pays \$6.00 an hour [March, 1994], which is the highest paying student job on campus. Money to pay their salaries comes from a special "Friends of the Planetarium" group which I began last year. For twenty dollars, donors can see their names projected on the planetarium dome after each presentation. Our "Friends" group members have the pleasure of helping students help themselves to further their education by gaining practical work experience, and we gain a competent staff for our planetarium.

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