SUNY ESF: Strengthening Our Community
Background and Current Status Report for 12/15/15 Faculty Meeting

In November of 2015 Sears Associates was engaged by the SUNY Provost’s Office to assist the College of Environmental Sciences and Forestry (ESF) community address current concerns related to campus relationships and leadership. The initial activity consisted of a meeting on November 17th with an eight-person “core group” of ESF faculty and administrators, together with representatives from SUNY. What follows is a brief summary of subsequent activities and next step recommendations.

Interviews Summary: One-on-one interviews were conducted with 22 individuals representing department chairs, faculty, CSEA staff, professional staff, graduate and undergraduate students, ESF administration, and the SUNY Provost’s Office. The summary points are as follows:

1. There is widespread confidence in ESF as a college, both on campus and from SUNY, and there is much goodwill toward the common goal of its success
2. Interviewees acknowledged that change is needed, and if problems are addressed appropriately, real opportunities exist to strengthen ESF as an institution
3. There are many concerns about unproductive relationships, an erosion of trust, and some aspects of the environment on campus
4. Significant leadership challenges exist linked to the transition of administration and to the “perfect storm” of financial and institutional challenges that it inherited
5. There are substantial needs for improving communication within and across groups
6. There exists confusion about roles and authority as the campus moves to shared decision-making

Proposed Next Steps: We propose an inclusive array of meeting opportunities on leadership, communication and governance. Possible forums to include:

1. **Focus groups** for all interested in participating (early January - February). Small, homogeneous groups of chairs, tenured faculty, non-tenured faculty, administrators, Board of Trustee members, and professional staff will convene to address issues such as:
   - The needs and possible means for improving information sharing
   - Clarifying understanding of roles and responsibility for campus leadership functions
   - Identifying communication breakdowns and determining constructive strategies for improvement
   - Identifying priorities and means for changes in faculty-administration interaction
   - Clarifying interest in and most effective means to work toward shared governance/decision-making
2. **Cross-discipline/role stakeholder groups** convened to develop action steps on Leadership, Communication, and Governance based on information from focus group settings (mid-March - April)
3. **One-on-one consultation** with selected individuals in key leadership roles (January - April)
4. **Facilitated conversations between individuals** experiencing particularly challenging interactions (January - April)
5. **Facilitation assistance to existing task/management groups** to assist them in interacting more effectively (January - April)
6. **Utilization of external resources** as appropriate. Assist in identification of internal (SUNY) and external resources that may be useful to ESF in its ongoing capacity-building related to priority issues (January - April)
SEARS ASSOCIATES is an organizational development consulting practice that offers teams of professionals with qualifications individually matched to each client’s unique project needs. Our interventions are built around the core principle of participation, wherein every interaction is seen as an opportunity to develop collective understanding of issues and needs as well as build ownership of process and outcomes. We continually encourage participants to see the “big picture” and work in ways that are responsive to the many layers that exist within complex-system environments. With more than 20 years of professional collaboration, our consulting team for SUNY/ESF at this time includes the following individuals:

Ann Martin is a former outreach faculty member and Associate Dean of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. Her work has focused on organizational improvement, interest-based negotiations, and dialogues across difference, all of which she has both taught and facilitated.

Judith Saul is founder and former director of the Community Dispute Resolution Center based in Ithaca, NY. She is a certified mediator, trainer and Fellow of the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation where she developed a dialogue process for dealing with ethnic and political conflict. Her experience working with groups has placed her on the roster of the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution.

Scott Sears is the Principal of Sears Associates. In this role and as a former member of the Extension Faculty at Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, his work has ranged widely from interpersonal mediation, to full-scale governmental agency development, to academic institutional planning, to assisting gatherings of world leaders in deliberations on poverty in developing nations.