

Decision Theater Picking Up Steam

The name “Decision Theater North” is something of a misnomer.

That’s because the new visualization space in the West Ridge Research Building at UAF doesn’t often function as a theater, even though its defining features are seven mammoth screens forming a semicircle along one wall. The main purpose of the room isn’t presentation, it’s dialogue.

“With the complex problems facing the Arctic and the amount of research we’re doing, we were looking for ways to bring people together to talk about current issues,” said Alaska NSF EPSCoR Associate Project Director Pips Veazey, the prime mover behind Decision Theater North. “And so this is a space where we can bring together people to talk about complex issues and look at lots of data spread across the 60 million pixels’ worth of screens.”

The theater, which was funded by UAF and Alaska NSF EPSCoR, is based on similar spaces at Arizona State University and at the McCain Institute in Washington, D.C. In addition to the seven 75-inch screens ringing its conference table, it also features audio, a videoconference system, high-speed wi-fi, dedicated memory and a 10-gig link to UAF. As the name suggests the room is meant to foster informed decisions, both within and outside of academia.

“There’s research to suggest that people are more empathetic when they are looking at information on the screen together and discussing it, rather than videoconferencing or calling in to a teleconference,” Veazey said.

The versatile space opened in 2016 and has been used for dozens of seminars, webinars, trainings, meetings and thesis defenses. It was open for multiple demonstrations at Arctic Science Summit Week in 2016 and at Week of the Arctic a year later, and in May it displayed the winners of an EPSCoR-sponsored visualization contest at its first-ever First Friday. The Federal Emergency Management Agency brought in 35 people from different agencies to the theater for a disaster simulation, and the American Red Cross has used it for four “Mapathons” in which participants contribute content to the Open Street Maps database to aid humanitarian responders.

The theater also hosted a tsunami simulation run in collaboration with Sandia National Laboratories, which demonstrated the potential of merging Sandia software and UAF data to aid in emergency response. More recently, EPSCoR researchers held a workshop with the Board of Directors of Kuukpik, the corporation of the North Slope village of Nuiqsut, to share EPSCoR work in the area and to identify common research interests. Researchers filled the screens with information and imagery, kick-starting some animated back-and-forths among attendees.

“It’s almost like this excuse to bring people together here,” Veazey enthused. “We have this space, how can we use it to serve our community, whether it’s Fairbanks or the state of Alaska or the circumpolar North?”

The space is maintained and operated by EPSCoR with assistance from the Geographic Information Network of Alaska and the UAF Office of Information Technology. It’s also spurred the creation of a developmental room across the hall, which began life as a place to program content for the theater, but has grown to include new technology for visualizing and sharing data, including a 360-degree camera, virtual reality gear and a 3-D printer.



Pips Veazey presents in Decision Theater North.



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