Bill Schnabel, PhD, PE - Biography

Bill Schnabel moved north in 1992 seeking to experience, learn from, and contribute to Alaska’s lands and people. From that point forward, his affinity for the Great Land and its citizens has never wavered. While he did move closer to his family in the Midwest on several occasions for brief periods, Alaska’s allure consistently compelled him to return to his adopted home in the North. Over the past 25 years, Bill has experienced the University of Alaska through a diversity of perspectives; as a community member, as a student, as a parent, as a faculty member, and as an administrative leader. As he wove himself over those years into the fabric of Alaska, Fairbanks, and UAF in particular, his enthusiasm for our shared community has only increased. While Bill’s current challenges may be more complex compared those of his early years, in his heart Bill is still that idealistic young man driving up the Alaska Highway seeking to make a difference in a magical land.

Bill has served as a UAF administrative leader since 2009, when his full-time faculty member role transformed into a jointly-appointed faculty/administrator role. His trajectory led from Director of the Water and Environmental Research Center (WERC), to Associate Director of the Institute of Northern Engineering (INE), and finally to his current positions as INE Director and Associate Dean for Research at UAF’s College of Engineering and Mines (CEM). In these positions of increasing responsibility, Bill established himself as an energetic, empathetic, and creative academic leader. Under Bill’s leadership, WERC significantly diversified its research personnel and portfolio to establish successful programs in marine mammal research, human dimensions of environmental science/engineering, and interdisciplinary approaches to complex phenomena such as food-energy-water relationships. As INE Director, Bill successfully led the institute through a challenging series of external budget cuts into an era of increasingly substantial new research awards. INE currently boasts a diverse array of successful research faculty members, and Bill was instrumental in hiring 75% of them. As CEM’s Associate Dean for Research, Bill works with faculty throughout the college to help develop strong research programs while at the same time striving for excellence in the classroom. Bill is a dedicated and consistent advocate for INE across the UAF campus, around Alaska, and in our nation’s capital. He has studied leadership principals throughout his career, and understands how to effectively motivate diverse groups of people towards a common set of goals. Bill believes that true leadership is characterized not by metrics of the leader, but rather by the achievements of the community served.

As a faculty member, Bill has taught graduate and undergraduate engineering courses as well as conducted Arctic-centric environmental engineering research since 2002. In his teaching, he garnered a strong rapport with his students for his creative and enthusiastic approach to the course material, as well as his respect for the students’ time, interests, and diversity of perspectives. Indeed, much of his motivation for pursuing the position of CEM Dean stems from his passion, first discovered in the classroom, for fostering a superlative student experience. In his research, Bill developed an ever-broadening portfolio beginning with water quality-related pursuits, then expanding to include landscape-level Arctic hydrologic processes and the complex challenges associated with human development in the Arctic and Subarctic. Bill currently leads an NSF-funded study focused on enhancing food-energy-water security in rural Alaska communities, as well as a Denali Commission study intending to evaluate the combined environmental threats of flooding, erosion, and permafrost thaw on Alaska’s rural infrastructure. Bill has travelled extensively throughout Alaska and beyond to promote INE and as well as to engage in outreach associated with his own research. For example, in September 2018 he travelled to Bethel to discuss with stakeholders the preliminary results of the Denali Commission infrastructure project. Most recently, Bill gave an October 2018 invited presentation to an audience near Shanghai. His motivation for making the trip to China was to investigate the common challenges and elucidate the research opportunities shared between one of America’s least populous states, and the world’s most populous country.