“Taking the Public’s Temperature on a Hot Topic: The Challenges and Opportunities for Promoting Public Understanding and Acceptance of Climate Change”

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Thursday: January 15, 2015
12pm in 33-105 CHS

Climate change is a complex topic that is not easy to teach, learn, or communicate. Most explanations reduce the difficulty to either deficits in the public’s knowledge or political objections. In fact, a broad array of challenges must be overcome to communicate effectively, or to teach or learn, about climate change. These include overcoming prior misconceptions, negative attitudes, cognitive biases, and motivated reasoning. This presentation will highlight areas of challenge and discuss the implication of these challenges for communicating, teaching, and learning about climate change.

Dr. Gale M. Sinatra is a Professor of Education and Psychology at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. She received her B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She spent 10 years on the faculty of University of Utah and 10 years as a professor of Educational Psychology at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is the past Editor of the APA Division 15 journal, Educational Psychologist. She is past Vice President of AERA’s Division C, Learning and Instruction. She is a Fellow of both APA and AERA. She heads the Motivated Change Research Lab at USC, the mission of which is understanding the cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes that lead to attitude change, conceptual change, and successful STEM learning. Sinatra’s model of conceptual change learning (see Sinatra, 2005) describes how motivational factors contribute to the likelihood that individuals will change their thinking about a scientific topic. Her most recent publication (Sinatra et al., 2014), Addressing challenges to public understanding of science: Epistemic cognition, motivated reasoning, and conceptual change appears in Educational Psychologist.

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