ECSU biology chairman to take on national role

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WILLIMANTIC — When Elizabeth Cowles started working at Eastern Connecticut State University 20 years ago, it was a different place.

“Eastern has changed a lot since I came,” Cowles, chairman of the biology department at Eastern, said. “Our department has grown.”

Her experience as a professor will come in handy when she takes on a new professional role next year.

Cowles was recently named president-elect of the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT), a group that provides resources to biology teachers in middle schools, high schools and colleges across the country.

Though she was named the next president earlier this month, she won’t officially begin her role as president until Jan. 1, 2018.

The NABT currently has about 3,500 members, including teachers from four-year universities, community colleges, high schools and middle schools.

“It’s an organization where the craft of teaching is really celebrated,” Cowles said in a press release from Eastern.

Cowles has been a member of NABT for 20 years, including serving on the board of directors for a three-year term that ended Jan 1.

She said in an Eastern press release that, as a new professor, she needed “lesson plans, ideas, resources and, most importantly, a caring community to help me during my first few years.”

“The most critical years of any teacher’s career are those first five,” Cowles said. “A lot of teachers quit because of all the demands placed upon them.”

She also served for eight years as editor of the NABT magazine, American Biology Teacher.

Cowles’ current, three-year term on the NABT board will end in December 2019.

“I will lead an organization that’s purpose is to help teachers do the best job they can,” she said.

She said the NABT aims to “make sure all biology teachers are served regardless of whether they teach.”

Recently, NABT has utilized social media, such as Facebook, to communicate with its members.

She said NABT members post questions on the Facebook page for other members to answer.

“It’s a way for more seasoned teachers to mentor younger teachers,” said Cowles, noting the page is well-utilized.

Under her presidency, Cowles said she aims to make sure the NABT is meeting the needs of teachers and evaluate how successful the organization’s workshops are.

She said there was a recent push to make sure Advanced Placement biology teachers are aware of the NABT and the services it provides.

The NABT recently partnered with the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS), a group out of Colorado, to have summer workshops for teachers.

Cowles said BSCS is well-known for developing biology curriculum.

This coming summer will be the third summer those workshops have been running.

Cowles noted NABT also has a national conference, but “we need to do more.”

Cowles said since she began working at Eastern, the number of faculty and students in the biology department has increased.

She said the science building, which was built in 2008, “has given us the ability to stay current with research methods and ways to teach our students.”

Elizabeth Cowles, chairman of the biology department at Eastern Connecticut State University, was named president-elect of the National Association of Biology Teachers. She will begin her role in 2018.