

A Truly Interdisciplinary Approach: Challenges and Opportunities in the Environmental Studies Program at Guilford College

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The Environmental Studies (ENVS) program at Guilford College is a highly interdisciplinary program that emphasizes the understanding of systems and connections. Our program encourages students to study and address the quality of the Earth's environment, investigate the human relationship with nature, evaluate the role and impact of current and historical environmental policy decisions, and to search for more sustainable development options. The program's focus on justice, global awareness, and service to the larger community mesh very well with the liberal arts focus, Quaker heritage, and core values of the College.

Our ENVS major is an incredibly interdisciplinary, and offers a wide variety of course options from every academic division on campus. Students take a common introductory course, a required junior level environmental policy course, and the interdisciplinary capstone course. Students select among the options for 3 science courses, one non-science course, and an elective which may include an internship, research experiences, or study abroad opportunities. Nearly all Guilford College courses are worth 4 credits and 8 course sequences are typical for many majors on campus. Because there are so many options available for ENVS students, we have continued to maintain the program as a mandatory dual degree; students are free to choose almost any other disciplinary major to pair with the ENVS, and we work with each student individually to select courses that complement their interests and career goals.

I serve as the co-coordinator for the ENVS program along with Kyle Dell, an Associate Professor of Political Science. As a team and in conjunction with other ENVS faculty we have redesigned the curriculum, conducted assessments, facilitated the growth of the major, and have developed additional experiential learning opportunities for our majors including a team-taught course in the Galapagos Islands. I routinely teach the introductory and senior capstone courses and several geology lab science electives, and am one of the primary academic advisors for the major. This team based approach is a wonderful model for our students, and it fosters a sense of cooperation and collaboration among the various academic divisions that contribute to the major.

Despite the fact that this is a dual degree, our enrollment in the program has grown steadily over the past decade. With reasonable planning the second major has not been a significant barrier for students. We feel that requiring a disciplinary major has helped students identify many career opportunities that they may not have considered if they restricted their search to typical 'environmental' jobs. We believe the disciplinary background facilitates their ability to grasp the strengths of interdisciplinary problem solving. As an example, a Biology/ENVS double major may complement their conservation ecology courses with geoscience or policy courses, and may be more qualified for entry level positions compared with a student majoring in Environmental Science. Political Science/ENVS majors have several background courses in the sciences which serves to broaden their understanding of the earth and ecosystems; coupled with their deep understanding of political systems, they are well prepared to pursue environmental law or leap directly into complex decision making positions.

with state and local governments. We do face issues when students decide to focus in on the 'supplemental' part of their ENVS major following graduation; for instance, students may decide they want to pursue graduate studies in Ecology, but the three or four science courses they've taken as a part of their ENVS degree are not sufficient preparation. As advisors, we strive to avoid this through classroom and interpersonal discussion regarding long term goals and vocational discernment.

The interdisciplinary nature of the ENVS major is truly the strength of our program; students can take classes in Environmental Art, Urban Environmental History, Nature Writing, Biology and Ecology, Geology and Hydrology, Environmental Psychology, Early Environmentalism in America, Culture and the Environment, and Environmental Economics just to name a few. We strongly emphasize interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving throughout the required courses, and our students truly understand the complexity of environmental issues, and easily grasp that multiple perspectives are necessary to reach meaningful solutions. I'm constantly amazed at how easily students are able to move beyond the simplistic viewpoint, and begin to identify areas that require more thought, more research, and more effective approaches.

At Guilford, there are several interdisciplinary majors, including Environmental Studies, that reside within the Interdisciplinary Division (IDS). Most programs in this division do not have a central core location, and faculty are not hired directly into the IDS majors. Tenure track searches conducted by disciplinary departments are encouraged to include and consider IDS connections and departments are also encouraged to support the majors through course offerings. However, we have only one faculty member with a contractual obligation of teaching one course per year into the ENVS program, which means the ENVS major is primarily driven by faculty with an intense passion for the subject who strive fit these courses into their rotation. I am "fortunate" in the sense that the Geology department is relatively small; I depend upon the ENVS courses to fill my schedule, particularly in years when I am not teaching multiple upper level Geology courses. This is not the situation for most of my colleagues, however. Many of the ENVS course options are considered electives within the disciplinary departments and in times of tightening budgets and lower enrollment these elective courses are sometimes cut. Because course contributions are not mandated, the needs of the IDS majors are almost always secondary to those of the sponsoring department. The lack of contracted faculty commitment to the ENVS program poses challenges for long term course planning and consistency within the curriculum. We are currently in contact with several departments in an effort to develop joint tenure track position proposals that would include contractual commitments to teach courses in the Environmental Studies curriculum, which we hope may address some of these issues.

The ENVS program at Guilford College is vibrant and growing and we have a core group of passionate and dedicated faculty. Our students are interested in studying sustainability, identifying interdisciplinary connections, and they are motivated to engage in vocations that promote meaningful social and environmental change. We are proud of our program, but realize the need to stay updated to ensure we are preparing our students to succeed in this rapidly evolving, complex field of study.