

Data-Based Curriculum Decisions

The results of our learning outcomes surveys and interviews of graduating students are discussed at annual department retreats that occur just prior to a new academic year. Over the years we have used this information in various ways, including:

- Due to feedback from Geography and Geography Teaching majors that they did not feel like full-fledged “members” of the College, we revised the introductory course for freshmen and transfers, Professional Orientation for Environment and Society (ENVS 1990) to include significantly more content about the role of geographers in 21st century society, and required the course in all four of our undergraduate majors.
- We also experimented with requiring Geography majors to take ENVS 5000, Collaborative Problem-Solving for Environment and Natural Resources, but this was later changed to an optional course because not all Geography students – depending on their area of emphasis – do not take the preparatory courses needed to succeed in that class.
- When the department was created in 2002, our Environmental Studies and Geography major requirements were crafted to maximize flexibility, since both curricula can lead students in a wide variety of career paths. A few years later, in response to student concerns that they needed more guidance in developing meaningful specializations, a series of Emphasis Areas were developed which include a small set of optional courses (typically 6-7, of which a student must take at least 4 to complete the emphasis requirement).
- Assigned readings in ENVS 1990 have been chosen partly in response to students’ comments that studies of human-environment impacts tend to emphasize the negative aspects of human behavior. As a result we have actively sought readings that offer success stories from around the world (e.g., David Suzuki and Holly Dressel’s *Good News: How Everyday People are Helping the Planet*, and Paul Hawken’s *Blessed Unrest* on grassroots activism). A new course in Sustainable Living (ENVS 5570) has also proved popular with students who want practical skills as well as theoretical concepts.

The most significant response to ongoing assessment was made in Fall 2008 when the Geography major was completely overhauled. In order to strengthen our curriculum in the areas of physical geography and GIS/remote sensing, the departments of Environment & Society and Watershed Sciences now jointly administer the major. One ongoing concern of students has been that too much content was crammed into the Geographic Information Systems course (WATS 4930), and it was difficult to meet the needs of both majors who need depth of coverage and other Natural Resources majors who need breadth and practical skills. Accordingly we now offer a lower-division GIS course, WATS 2930, which will serve most non-majors so that WATS 4930 can offer the necessary depth. There are now three emphasis areas in Geography – Physical Geography, Human-Environment Geography, and Geographical Analysis & Bioregional Planning – that more closely fit

the current expertise within the department as well as the general trends in the field.

Because the new major goes into effect in Fall 2009 some of the information gained in the 2008-09 assessment is no longer applicable. However, based on information received from 2008-2009 learning outcomes surveys, we will continue to look for ways to strengthen two areas within the Geography and Geography Teaching degrees: international policy, and written communication.

For 2009-2010 the Environmental Studies major will be similarly evaluated to see if a major restructuring of the curriculum would be useful. This will address potential overlaps in course content, as well as gaps in our success at achieving learning outcomes in social change, written communication, and international policies and issues.

For the Recreation Resource Management degree, re-evaluation of the curriculum is on hold for the year. Of four instructors who have taught the recreation-specific courses in the major, two left the department at the end of the 2008-09 academic year. The courses have been reassigned, and their instructors are reviewing how they perceive the significance of different learning outcomes.

Our graduate programs were also under review in 2008-09, although no final decisions were made about revision of core requirements for the Human Dimensions of Ecosystem Science major or extending those requirements to other degree programs (Recreation Resource Management, Bioregional Planning). The ENVS 6840 orientation seminar has been revised to reflect students' concerns about the content of that class. Also in 2009, our first Graduate Pre-Project Symposium was held to offer students a chance to present their ideas in a forum reflecting that of a scientific meeting outside the department or university. Opportunities for students to present final project results will be expanded in 2009-2010.