

ASSETT Faculty Fellows Project—Final Report, 2019-2020

Senior Skills Survey—Gathering Student Perceptions of ENVS Learning Outcomes

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Synopsis

Building upon previous Faculty Fellow curriculum mapping project, the product of this Faculty Fellows project is a skills survey designed to distribute to recent Environmental Studies (ENVS) major graduates. With previous Faculty Fellow projects focused on course-level learning outcomes within the major, this project zeros in on program-level outcomes that can be used to map and align future iterations of the undergraduate curriculum. In collaboration with the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee and ENVS's DBER specialist, the project advanced the curriculum mapping and alignment process by catalyzing progress on a faculty-approved list of program-level outcomes for the major.

Challenge

As an interdisciplinary and relatively new program, Environmental Studies has traditionally relied upon collaborations with other programs and departments within Arts and Sciences to deliver its undergraduate curriculum. Over the past several years, the program has grown and recognized the need to more narrowly focus its curriculum and to align it with the expertise of faculty hired. The central aim of the project has been to build upon the curriculum alignment work of previous faculty fellows, Eve-Fyn FHinckley and Fisa Dilling, who worked to identify course-level learning outcomes for introductory, mid-level, and senior-level courses in the curriculum.

A central curriculum mapping challenge the Environmental Studies Program is ensuring that the curriculum it delivers aligns both with the expertise of current faculty and with the skills graduates need to solve 21st Century environmental problems. Past Faculty Fellows projects examined and developed course-level learning goals for foundational and pivotal courses within the curriculum, setting the stage for an exploration of program-level outcomes of the ENVS curriculum. The Senior Skills Survey dovetailed with the move toward identifying skills that ENVS graduates could anticipate developing through the major curriculum and developed a survey the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee can use to evaluate student perceptions of how effectively the current curriculum delivers the prospective outcomes for the program.

Aim

The desired result of the project was to build upon work of past Faculty Fellows to advance the curriculum mapping process in ENVS. Eve-Fyn FHinckley (ASSETT Faculty Fellow, 2017-2018) convened a Faculty Learning Community to devise a set of learning goals for the introductory Environmental Studies series, ENVS 1000 and ENVS 1001. Fisa Dilling (ASSETT Faculty Fellow, 2018-2019) continued the Faculty Learning Community to continue the work and convened faculty focus groups to share the learning outcomes and challenges they face in delivering the content for ENVS Cornerstone and Capstone courses—key mid- and upper-level ENVS requirements.

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The next phase of the Curriculum Mapping project, after devising course-level learning outcomes for ENVS-specific required courses (ENVS 1000, 1001, Cornerstone and Capstone), was to get a clearer sense of Program-Level outcomes—what knowledge, skills, and attitudes are characteristic of the undergraduate education offered by the Environmental Studies major at CU. As a wide-ranging and deeply interdisciplinary program, the prospect of identifying a small set of agreed-upon content or attitudes was beyond the scope of a single project, but common skills for framing environmental problems and proposing solutions was attainable. As the curriculum mapping and alignment work gained momentum, the initial faculty learning communities were disbanded, now under the auspices of the Environmental Studies Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, led in 2019-2020 by Lisa Dilling.

Project

The initial aim of the project was to devise a set of learning outcomes from previous documents, design a survey to distribute to graduating seniors, and share the survey results with the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee to use for curriculum mapping. During the course of the project, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee prioritized curriculum mapping and alignment during the 2019-2020 academic year, which affected the process of developing the learning outcomes list, and the COVID-19 outbreak has affected the distribution of the survey. EHowever, the project did result in devising a survey to distribute to recent ENVS graduates in order to gauge their perceptions of their learning in the major and facilitate next steps in the curriculum mapping and alignment processes.

Preparing the survey involved extensive collaboration with the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee on a first draft of program-level outcomes drawn from several past curriculum mapping projects, which eventually were solidified by the committee chair, Lisa Dilling. The program-level outcomes were first approved by the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, then distributed to the full ENVS faculty for review, and the survey was developed in consultation with Julie Sexton, DBER research faculty in ENVS. The survey was rendered in Qualtrics, and the outcomes polled in the survey are the most current version—approved by the curriculum committee and revised based on feedback from the full faculty.

Outcome

Although the scope of the project contracted due to shifting circumstances, the pilot survey should offer some baseline information about student perceptions of what they have learned as Environmental Studies majors. In the sense that the project both catalyzed and benefitted from progress in the curriculum mapping process and can feed information back into the process as the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee moves toward identifying milestones and benchmarks within the curriculum, the project was successful in advancing the process.

Among the lessons of the project were insights into the challenges of addressing the tension of generality and specificity required for mapping a curriculum, especially in an

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interdisciplinary program like Environmental Studies. While the focus on skills served as a good entre into the conversation and finding common ground, the process of discerning a small set of skills ENVS can require and guarantee graduates of its undergraduate program was challenging. Attempting to accommodate the complexity and breadth of environmental challenges while also identifying concrete skills and tools students need to address them was a fascinating challenge and will likely be iterated in process of identifying the content-focused and attitudinal outcomes as the curriculum mapping process proceeds.

Reflections

Overall, the process of tackling the challenge was interesting and illustrated the value of collaboration in interdisciplinary work. The support of ASSETT, past Faculty Fellows, the ENVS Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, and the ENVS DBER research faculty made the project possible and helped generate a much better survey than I had imagined at the outset of the process. The Faculty Fellows Seminar served as a great foundation and starting point for thinking not only about the curriculum mapping project, but techniques and strategies to use in improving my own teaching—from syllabus revision to individual in-class activities.

Appendices

Appendix A: Qualtrics Senior Survey

Appendix B: ENVS Undergraduate Revised Learning Outcomes, May 2020