

#### IV. Environmental Studies: Here, There, and Everywhere

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Environmental Studies

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In the last two decades, there has been an increase in the number of Interdisciplinary Programs (Ips) in colleges and universities across the U.S. Although there is still a considerable discussion of what an interdisciplinary program is, it is generally agreed that these programs are those that deal with specific situations and cases for which you need to integrate branches from a wide diversity of fields of knowledge, usually an integration of natural and social sciences and even the humanities.

Environmental Studies would be a good example of an interdisciplinary program. When dealing with issues such as acid rain, deforestation, and global warming, you need to teach your students that these problems have many different angles: the natural and physical sciences would explain the chemical reactions that take place in the atmosphere, for example, when dealing with emission-related problems (ozone layer depletion, greenhouse gases, acid precipitation, etc.). The social sciences will look at the economic and policy related implications of the problem (cross-border pollution, cost-benefit analysis, international law), and people from the humanities will deal with the historical, philosophical, and/or ethical issues related to the issue. The overall objective is to inform the students of the complexity of the problem and to prepare them for the type of interpersonal and professional relationships that they will have to develop if they ever get involved in environmentally related careers. Whether one is working for an environmental consulting company, a government agency, or a nonprofit organization, one must be prepared to understand the intricacies of the issues and be prepared to deal with the jargon and varying points-of-view that intersect within the issues. An example of this multidisciplinary interaction is the process of doing an Environmental Impact Assessment, a procedure that has become very common today before any action is carried out on our land.

At Macalester College, which has one of the oldest Environmental Studies (ES) programs in the nation (founded in 1972), we decided to revamp our ES program in order to make it more in tune with the societal demands of the 21st Century, within the setting of a Liberal Arts College, and for students that have developed a great deal of interest in these issues.

This seminar helped us to think through the major issues related to the long-term goals of the ES Program. We extensively reviewed the literature on this topic (see



"Readings" below) in order to gain an insight from the experiences of other programs in the U. S.

We began by defining what the focus of our Environmental Studies program should be: an interdisciplinary program based on a holistic understanding of environmental issues occurring at the local, national, and global level; a program that offers students tools and perspectives from the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences to understand the causes and consequences of environmental problems and the knowledge to develop potential solutions.

We also discussed how to ensure that students will acquire a solid environmental literacy by touring them through the different areas of knowledge they had to master in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, through environmental-related courses in those disciplines or integration of them at the Junior and Senior levels, while maintaining the requirement that students must also major in an approved department so we could keep a balance between depth and breath.

We concluded by reading selected chapters of E. O. Wilson's *Consilience* and his promotion of an education on the basis of students being able to make connections, develop interpersonal skills, and see problems more globally. We concluded that Liberal Arts Colleges, because of their size and demographics, seem to be the ideal grounds for producing these "consilient" professionals of the future. After all, today's students are those who will lead organizations and government agencies into the future. To do this effectively, they will need insight and a broad view of service and organization, while maintaining high levels of professional performance.

### Readings

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