REPORT FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES CURRICULAR REVISION PIG - SPRING 2025

PIG members

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Introduction

During spring semester 2025, 10 members of the Environmental Studies faculty met eight times (one hour per meeting) with the goal of envisioning the future of the ES program at Whitman.

Our discussions were wide-ranging and thorough, and included consideration of the basic principles underpinning the ES program, including program goals and learning outcomes, as well as evidence from a variety of sources, including the structure of environmental studies programs at numerous other liberal arts colleges and one major university, the external review of ES conducted in 2019, student comments from two focus groups we ran during the semester, syllabi from core ENVS classes, and our own collective experience, which sums to decades. We also considered the constraints facing our program, which are primarily due to staffing, since almost all of our faculty members are committed in-part or entirely to providing courses in departments other than ES.

Primary outcomes

Program Goals and Learning Outcomes.

Early in our discussion, we considered the program goals and learning outcomes for revision. We ultimately decided that the existing program goals and learning outcomes were well articulated and reflected our expectations for the program. We thus have retained these goals and outcomes in their current form.

Program Goals
To foster critical thinking skills in relation to environmental problems

To enhance environmental literacy
To encourage interdisciplinary integration of disciplinary approaches to environmental concerns
To develop communication skills in a wide variety of formats designed for diverse audiences

Learning Outcomes
Students will be able to:
Articulate an understanding of relevant concepts that underlie environmental processes, thought and governance in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities.
Integrate and apply sophisticated perspectives from multiple disciplinary approaches that address complex environmental problems
Design and conduct research on environmental topics. Research could include a variety of methods (quantitative, qualitative, artistic, rhetorical, spatial, etc.) as well as in a variety of contexts (senior thesis, summer research, course assignments, study abroad, etc.).
Communicate effectively in both written and oral formats to academic and non-academic audiences

Overall curricular framework.

We were open to and discussed radical revisions of the ES curriculum, including changes such as eliminating the combined major format, eliminating current required courses, eliminating current requirement categories, and dramatic restructuring of introductory and capstone courses. We ultimately decided to retain the current basic structure of the Environmental Studies major while also developing plans to revise aspects of our required core courses (ES120, ES207, and ES479) to better meet our learning goals and provide more flexibility regarding staffing. We based our decision on our pedagogical goals, our consideration of a wide array of alternatives, and our staffing constraints.

Most broadly, the committee remains committed to the combined major format. With this format, each Environmental Studies major must combine their ES major with a major in a discipline (Div 1: Anthropology, Economics, History, Politics, Sociology; Div 2: Art, Humanities [an organizational outlier]; Div 3: Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Physics). There are multiple benefits to this format. By rooting themselves in a discipline, students gain a depth of conceptual background and analytical skill that has value when evaluating environmental issues here at Whitman and in the world beyond. Further, this disciplinary training keeps doors open to future graduate work in that discipline, which our students often choose to pursue. The combined major framework also works well with the staffing constraints that we face. Many of the faculty members who teach environmentally-relevant classes have full time teaching obligations within their home disciplines. These faculty members are therefore in excellent positions to provide courses and to mentor combined-ES majors in those home disciplines.

The committee also decided to retain the course requirements as they currently stand. These courses are as follows:

ENVS 120 - Introduction to Environmental Studies

The committee members agreed that an introductory course that exposes students to a wide swath of disciplinary approaches to studying environmental issues has multiple advantages. We want students to understand that Environmental Studies is fundamentally multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and we want to model that from the start with an intro course. We also want students to be aware of the many different combined majors available to them in Environmental Studies. However, the current version of the course may not optimally meet these goals and so to better meet these objectives, we will revise both the syllabus and teaching model. We describe our plan for those revisions below in a subsequent section of this report. In addition, we concluded that the excursion (field trip) component to this class serves multiple important functions for students entering the ES major. The excursions provide experiential learning opportunities related to multiple environmental issues with links to the Walla Walla region, they allow students to meet with a diverse set of environmental stakeholders, and they help students develop a sense of place.

ENVS 207 - Environmental Methods

The existing Environmental Methods class, taught every semester, introduces students to the basics of (a) statistical analysis and (b) spatial analysis using GIS (geographic information systems). The committee decided that devoting a course to teaching these basic skills remains essential for our students. Information about environmental issues is often reported in the form of statistics, and so basic quantitative literacy is essential for any environmental studies student. Further, environmental issues are often explicitly spatial, and therefore GIS is often a vital part of both analyzing these issues and presenting information to decision makers and to the public. Our students have frequently mentioned the value of the GIS experience gained in this class in helping them obtain internships and jobs. As with Intro to ES, we plan to redesign this course this next year and we describe this later in the report.

Foundational coursework (2 foundational courses in each division outside the major division)

Foundational courses provide the multi-disciplinary core of the ES major. A student with a major in a given division (1, 2, or 3) must take four foundational courses, two in each of the other two divisions outside the major division. Exposing students to these diverse disciplinary perspectives on environmental issues supports the program's learning goals. The foundational category also leverages the diverse environmentally-themed courses provided by the many environmental studies faculty members who do not have contractual obligations to ES and who must teach courses in their home departments.

ENVS 3xx - Interdisciplinary courses

All ES majors must complete at least one upper-level interdisciplinary environmental studies course. These classes must contain analysis that spans at least two of the three academic divisions. We considered the possibility of eliminating this requirement as a way to free teaching resources for other core Environmental Studies classes, such as ENVS 120, 207, and 479. However, this benefit of reallocated teaching resources would be relatively small, and the costs to our students of the loss of this requirement would be substantial. The benefit would be small because many courses in this category are taught by faculty members whose obligations to their home departments mean that they cannot teach core ENVS classes (these faculty members are able to teach ENVS interdisciplinary classes because they cross-list the classes in their home department). The costs to students are substantial because the classes in this category are the only full (4-credit) upper level courses to explicitly embrace the interdisciplinary analyses of environmental issues that is the core of our major.

ENVS 479 - Environmental Citizenship and Leadership (aka Senior seminar)
This course is required of all senior ES majors. The committee agreed that a senior seminar course is useful to our students. There is value to bringing everyone together (though we have so many majors that they are split between two sections, one in fall and one in spring) and explicitly applying interdisciplinary analysis to environmental issues in a collaborative environment in which students are expected to take leadership roles. However, there was not a consensus on the ideal form this class should take in the future. We discuss our plans for continuing discussion of senior seminar below.

Plans for revisions within the core curriculum.

The committee developed initial plans for revising all three of the ENVS courses required of all ES majors.

ENVS 120 - Introduction to Environmental Studies
This is a <u>tentative</u> plan for revisions to maintain and improve the aspects of the course that best meet the learning goals of the program, while providing greater flexibility in terms of staffing. We plan to apply for a Spring 2026 PIG to support our planning and implementation of a revision for this course.

- Switch to one lecture section per semester - cap of 48 students.
- Adopt a common syllabus across all instructors
    - To be created in PIG spring 2026
- Lecture team taught (2 instructors, ideally from different divisions)
    - Incorporating new instructors will be possible with this new model that reduces barriers to entry (including regarding content expertise and the possibility of teaching for a 1.0 [instead of 1.5] unit commitment - see below). With this plan, at least one of the instructors will have taught ENVS120 before, so we can avoid having a semester where both instructors are new to Whitman and to the course.
    - Both instructors attend every class
    - Both instructors receive 1.0 teaching credits for this portion of course
    - Divide the class into two or more groups as relevant for class discussion
- Two excursion sections per semester - cap of 24 students. Single instructor per section
    - Excursions are 0.5 teaching credits, and they can be divided between the two instructors, or one instructor can teach both sections for 1.0.

- Enhance discussion of the rest of the ENVS program and all major options, through instruction and the use of internal faculty guest lecturers. This responds to a common point of feedback from upper-class ENVS majors that they often did not learn about all ENVS options until too late in their time at Whitman.

ENVS 207 - Environmental Methods
This is a rough plan for revisions to allow ES to continue to provide this important class that has, to-date, been taught every semester only by a single instructor.

- Retain focus on statistics and GIS, which students told us offer direct, tangible benefits in terms of internship and job seeking, and contribute to their learning in other courses and in their thesis projects
    - basic principles that can be used to interpret statistical and spatial information
    - Basic skills for analyzing statistical and spatial data
        - Consider which statistics program is the most useful and accessible, possibly switching to R (for statistics)
        - Continue using ARC GIS (for spatial analyses)
- Consider whether to move to a higher capacity computer lab, which could allow for slightly higher class sizes (using the current GIS Lab requires 12-person Lab section, which limits ENVS-207 to a hard cap of 24 students, with two lab sections). For example, the Maxey computer lab has a higher number of computers with spatial analysis software installed.
- Create a class that multiple ENVS instructors could cycle through or potentially team-teach.

ENVS 479 - Environmental Citizenship and Leadership (aka Senior seminar)
Substantial uncertainty remains regarding the future of ENVS 479. We were hoping to form a PIG for the fall of 2025, but by the time we discussed this at the end of our spring 2025 PIG, there was no longer funding available.

- Future uncertain - possible curricular planning process in 25-26 academic year
- Possibly re-design to be based on a collaborative project, possibly with local community relevance
- Staffing this course has been a consistent challenge and there is a need to incorporate new instructors

Staffing plans to support the viability of the ES curriculum moving forward.

The major challenge for environmental studies at Whitman is insufficient FTEs with contractual commitments (and opportunities) to teach in our core curriculum. This will be exacerbated with an expected retirement. The committee endorses a plan to create a ‘three-legged stool’ model as suggested by our 2018 external review in which we have a full-time ENVS faculty member from each of the three divisions:

- Environmental Humanities
    - The EH major requires this line to continue to function. Unlike other ES majors, EH is not based in a disciplinary department, and therefore is more dependent on

dedicated ENVS faculty lines, especially for mentoring majors in their senior theses. We also need humanities courses in the foundational course category.
    - The ES program also needs faculty from across the curriculum, including in the humanities, to teach in our core curriculum of ENVS 120 and ENVS 479. Currently, the two humanities professors with commitments to teach in ES have substantial other obligations that typically prevents them from teaching these classes.
- Environmental Social Science
    - This class is a vital part of our curriculum, and we need to figure out how to provide it in a sustainable way moving forward. We do not believe it is reasonable or viable to hire a new faculty member to teach this course as approximately their entire teaching load. However, we do believe it is appropriate and necessary to hire someone to replace Amy who can regularly teach ENVS 207, because we cannot offer this important course with existing staffing alone.
    - This position would serve as the social science leg of the three-legged stool, and would bring quantitative analysis skills in the social sciences to the core ES faculty.
    - Needed to teach ENVS 207 - Environmental Methods (GIS expertise) and ENVS 120 - Intro to ES.
- Environmental Science (Climate Scientist, funding currently being sought by development office)
    - Anthropogenic climate change is arguably the largest environmental issue of our time, and Whitman has no faculty members who specialize in studying this topic. Therefore, hiring a climate scientist is essential for Whitman to provide ES students and others educational and scholarly opportunities in this monumentally important field. It also clearly aligns with the college's strategic priorities.
    - This position would provide the science leg of the three-legged stool.
    - For years, we have struggled to provide enough foundational coursework in science, and hiring this position would help address this shortfall.
    - Further, as described above, we desperately need staffing in ENVS to help teach both ENVS 207 - Environmental Methods (GIS expertise) and ENVS 120 - Intro to ES.