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Report for Project 2018-2019: Developing Harmonized Learning Goals across intermediate and senior capstone classes in Environmental Studies

Description:

Environmental Studies (ENVS) is interested in consolidating and harmonizing learning goals across our curriculum. ENVS now has over 16 full time faculty members and offers many more core classes taught by our own faculty. We have a curriculum that now presents the opportunity to be shaped and designed to provide a much more aligned and complementary set of classes that can build on each other throughout the major rather than being disconnected and in different departments. However this vision must be actively built by our faculty and implemented throughout our courses, with our faculty as partners. In this Fellowship year, I tackled a limited set of activities to move us along the path toward curriculum reform by focusing on 1) Assessing faculty interest and current practices toward learning goals at key curriculum levels through conducting two faculty focus groups, and 2) Sparking institutional change culminating in a faculty vote supporting a deliberate curriculum reform effort in Spring 2019.

Challenges:

The major has been broadly built on the pillars of science, values, and policy, with the practical outcome being that the curriculum was designed by committee, and students take a wide variety of courses from several introductory science courses, to environmental economics, statistics, environmental ethics, social science, policy, ecology, and topical courses on environmental issues such as energy production, climate change, and environmental justice. Ultimately, our goal is to identify and adopt common learning goals across 3 stages of the undergraduate Environmental Studies Program (ENVS) curriculum so that the aims of our pedagogy and curriculum are clear and coherent across the major for both faculty and students. Because we have not had such a vision thus far, faculty even in our own department have been largely building and teaching their courses without a sense of how their classes might fit into a larger overall major-wide set of learning goals. The challenges to achieving our goals, in my view, are (1) to achieve buy-in from those faculty who have not been part of the Faculty Learning Community, and (2) to change our departmental culture toward shared ownership of common learning outcomes for student success across the curriculum.

Desired Result:

We had three desired results from this project. One, to widen the circle of faculty who were thinking about broader curriculum reform and assess interest in this project. Two, to listen to faculty to understand what learning goals they already had in place in their classes. Three, to ask the faculty as a whole whether they are interested in pursuing a broader curriculum reform agenda through a formal vote in a faculty meeting.

Project implementation:

1. We continued meetings of the Faculty Learning Community established by Eve Hinckley in 2018-2019.
2. We conducted two focus groups of faculty teaching at the cornerstone (3000) and capstone (4800) levels.

3. We presented the rationale for curriculum reform efforts at the undergraduate level in two consecutive faculty meetings.

Outcomes:

Originally I had planned to do one-on-one interviews with faculty at the cornerstone and capstone levels, but due to personal time limitations and discussion with the FLC, we decided that focus groups of those faculty might be a better path to follow. This was indeed a good path, as the focus groups were really interesting and interactive, and people shared their goals, their philosophies, and their willingness to work more on common learning goals (or not). We had the assistance of a 5 hr a week GRA (a fellowship we have in pedagogy support) that was critical to helping me accomplish these focus groups, i.e. helping with finding a time block that worked for everyone, coming up with a protocol/script, cleaning up notes, finding a room, etc. Faculty time is really limited even for me as a designated faculty fellow and this support was critical. Originally I was hoping to have developed a common set of learning goals by the end of spring semester for these two class levels, but because the faculty approaches had some divergences and we needed a broader conversation about buy-in across the faculty, I did not push to achieve those. We do have a set of nice reports from those two focus groups, and a great starting place for next semester. We also learned halfway through in another group (the TRESTLE curriculum mapping SIG) about curriculum mapping through a new tool called CMAC, and explored using that tool a bit in the future for ENV5. We also collected syllabi across the two levels of courses as background input to all activities as well. Finally we presented at two full faculty meetings the work of the FLC, and asked at the end for a vote about whether the faculty as a whole wanted to continue to pursue curriculum reform. The vote was a unanimous yes, and has set us up well for tackling the nitty gritty details of curriculum-wide goals in the fall, and then further efforts to map the curriculum, identify gaps, and work towards linked learning outcomes across the curriculum. In addition, I have now been designated the new Undergraduate Chair in ENV5, and we are going to fold in the activities of the FLC into the undergrad curriculum meetings, so the mainstreaming of curriculum reform will continue. One lesson learned for me is that change takes time, and it's important to get buy in before trying to implement big new efforts. We have overwhelming support across junior and senior faculty ranks now for embarking on this larger project.

Reflection:

I have said most of the details of experience above. One thing I want to add is that these efforts are very time consuming and are largely done as a labor of love. The funding is nice but it doesn't create more time in the day and the tasks can get a bit overwhelming and contribute to faculty burnout. The capabilities of the staff at ASSETT, TRESTLE, and elsewhere are amazing and excellent and I have learned so much. It's just a hard balance with time to try to do something outside of the many other requirements we have in our jobs as faculty members, and we only have the same number of hours in the day as anyone else. I'm not sure if there's a way to give faculty buyouts as a fellowship or such for curriculum reform efforts- that might be a really nice idea in the future if it were feasible. Thank you ASSETT for an amazing two years and for all of the learning opportunities and support that you provide!