

Project Report: Assessing and Aligning the Environmental Design Foundation Curriculum

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Project Overview

The Department of Environmental Design has undergone a series of significant changes over the past few years, resulting in a new set of courses for our core foundation studios and lecture series. As two of the primary faculty involved in curriculum development for these courses, we have a unique vantage point: we witness the daily breakthroughs in student learning, but we also see the structural friction. We have noticed both opportunities and missed opportunities within the first three semesters, the critical period that defines and scaffolds skills and learning objectives for our students.

We are inspired by the potential to transform the often invisible logic of our curriculum into something tangible. Currently, our department struggles to connect the dots between early exercises and later expectations. By synthesizing our findings into a clear "Visual Framework," we can offer a roadmap that explains the logic of the progression of studies. We want faculty and especially students to see exactly how early graphic and verbal skills fuel their future success.

Goals

The primary goal of this project was to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the Environmental Design (ENVD) foundation curriculum (first three semesters). We aimed to move beyond isolated course structures and instead understand the curriculum as a scaffolded sequence of skills, concepts, and shared language.

This work is intended to:

- Clarify how skills develop across courses
- Identify gaps, overlaps, and disconnects
- Strengthen early student confidence in design thinking and communication
- Provide a shared framework for faculty/ course coordinators that supports “academic freedom within alignment”

Ultimately, we want both faculty and students to better understand the logic of progression and how early exercises connect to later expectations, design skills and thinking and eventually worldly applications.

Challenges

While we sustained momentum throughout the project, we did encounter some challenges. Some arose early in the project and others appeared a little later. These included:

- **Scale of the project:** The initial scope of curriculum reflection/mapping (entire foundation plus lecture courses plus studios plus tech) was larger than anticipated.
- **Incomplete faculty participation:** 12 of the 16 worksheets were returned, with varied depth. Additionally, we uncovered inconsistencies (or incongruencies) that made responses difficult to assimilate into a complete final assessment.
- **Time constraints:** After we began the worksheet portion of the project, we ran over our personal spring timeline which limited our overall schedule and prevented in-person faculty engagement.
- **Interpretation complexity:** Synthesizing diverse course syllabi into a unified framework required multiple iterations. This adjusted our desirable timeline and exposed the magnitude of the scope of research we tackled.
- **Departmental adjustments:** During this project, our Department has reflected upon a restructuring of course offerings that might significantly affect the foundation year studio/core curriculum.

These challenges allowed us to reflect on our most critical (and urgent) goals. We allowed our work to pivot and feel enthusiastic about a more aligned final outcome.

- We reduced the scope of this project to focus on the foundation year studio + TECH sequence
- We pivoted from full curriculum mapping to a targeted/competency framework
- We used partial data carefully, prioritizing consistency over completeness

Breaking a Rule

We challenged the assumption that: *“Courses operate independently and alignment will emerge organically.”* Instead we made the curriculum explicit and visible by identifying and introducing shared competencies across all foundation studios, asking faculty to map their work to a collective framework and prioritized cross-course consistency without eliminating autonomy. This shift revealed overlaps and gaps in our first year studio curriculum, opportunities for TECH to support studio more intentionally, create a shared language where not previously existed via

updated core competencies and position the first year curriculum as a designed system, not a byproduct.

Audience

Our key audience is a visual presentation and explanation to Studio and TECH faculty within our Department, foundation year studio and TECH coordinators and the ENVD curriculum committees. However, the direct impact will be first-year and early second-year ENVD students who will be able to track their growth through a clear (visual and written) progression framework.

Project Implementation

To execute a foundation year curriculum mapping, we created a phased approach centered on collaborative information gathering and assessment. Our strategy was to first gather data, then engage faculty for verification, and a final synthesis of findings into a visual matrix.

Process

Phase 1: Baseline Assessment & Worksheet Preparation (January 2026)

We collected and reviewed syllabi, learning objectives, and assignments across all foundation courses.

Courses included:

- Year 1 Fall: ENVD1010 (Studio 1 EPOD), ENVD1020 (Studio 1 ARCH), ENVD1002 (Tech 1), ENVD1004 (Intro), ENVD1976 (Colloquium)
- Year 1 Spring: ENVD1030 (Studio 1 LAND), ENVD1040 (Studio 1 PLAN), ENVD1012 (Tech 2), ENVD1024 (History)
- Year 2 Fall: ENVD1110/1120 (Studio 2), ENVD1022 (Tech 3), ENVD2003 (Ecological Systems), ENVD2101 (Planning and Implementation)

With this newly gathered information, we extracted learning objectives and skills, organized them into a standardized worksheet and identified recurring themes across courses. This initial action was critical in identifying an umbrella of criteria present in our foundation year sequence, utilizing common terms and language and unifying what, upon initial glance, was a disparate and uncoordinated demonstration of syllabi.

What arose from this initial process was a newly defined set of five Core Competencies. These competencies were common themes that existed in all the above listed courses and could be registered as overlapping content and a series of program values. These new core competencies are more student friendly, studio and TECH relatable and directly support the ENVD Department Learning Outcomes.

1. **Iterative Design Process & Critical Inquiry**
2. **Multimodal Communication & Representation Skills**
3. **Contextual & Spatial Fluency**
4. **Systems Thinking & Ecological Literacy**
5. **Ethics, Equity & Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

Phase 2: Faculty Working Sessions (February - mid-March 2026)

We distributed worksheets asking faculty who coordinate and/or teach the foundation year courses (studio, lecture and TECH) to share information about their courses. In this worksheet, faculty would review the newly identified core competencies alongside *Student Actions* (what students do), *Performance Indicators* (measures in the course rubric) and *Primary Evidence* (final deliverables/how students were assessed). This was an attempt to identify how faculty were distributing and assessing course content and how various information and skills were reaching students and being returned for assessment.

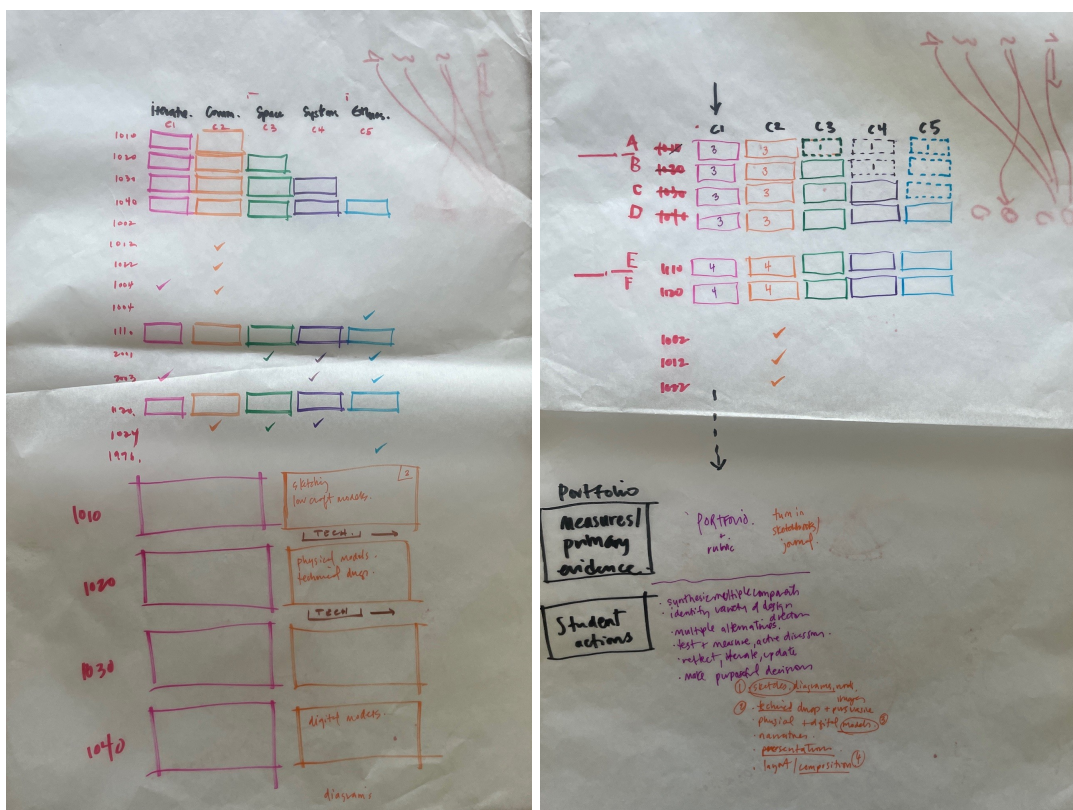
When evaluating student work for these competencies, identify the level of proficiency expected in your course.	
Do not focus on this outcome	(leave blank)
Minimal evidence; unclear reasoning; major errors; does not meet baseline expectations: Beginning	1
Partial or inconsistent application; limited depth/rigor; noticeable errors or gaps: Developing	2
Accurate and complete with minor issues; sound reasoning; appropriate methods.: Competent	3
Insightful, evidence-based, precise, and professional; anticipates constraints; communicates clearly to diverse audiences: Proficient	4

Excerpt from faculty curriculum mapping worksheet defining expected proficiency levels

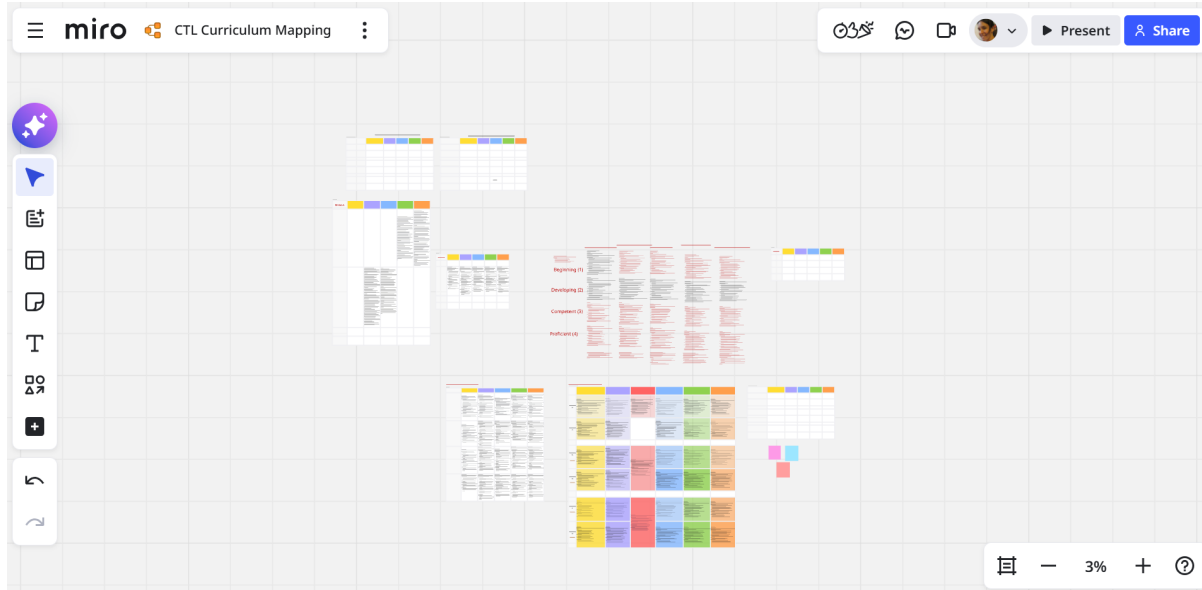
Due to time constraints we replaced one-on-one meetings with faculty with an email and recorded explanation of the worksheet purpose and intentions and instructors for completion. We received 12 out of 16 responses by early April, in various states of completion.

Phase 3: Analysis and Synthesis (~~March~~ April 2026)

During this phase, we reviewed responses and identified patterns across our courses including gaps and redundancies, and misalignments in terminology and expectations, utilizing trace paper and colored pens to initially sketch patterns and then transfer our conclusions into the online tool, MIRO to more formally organize our findings.



Trace paper sketches showing an initial effort to document and synthesize worksheet data for foundation studios + TECH



MIRO board showing updates and revisions of a visual curriculum mapping for foundation studios + TECH

Due to the overwhelming amount of content and diversity existing across studio, lecture and TECH courses, we reduced the scope of our project to focus on studio + TECH and began to construct a curriculum matrix including a visual development of competency progression across our six core studios (with an integration of TECH curriculum). Additionally, in order to allow autonomy for each course, we took a step back during the mapping phase and focused simply on Student Actions to determine our proficiency framework to advance student learning. This phase was the most time-intensive and interpretive.

The following courses were extracted from our curriculum mapping: ENVD1004 (Intro), ENVD1976 (Colloquium), ENVD1024 (History), ENVD2003 (Ecological Systems), ENVD2101 (Planning & Implementation).

During this phase, we met with Amanda McAndrew, our program facilitator, and started considering the outcomes of this project. There arose a possibility to consider student/course portfolios as a way of measuring learning objectives and solidifying a progression of core competencies.

EXISTING FOUNDATION YEAR STUDIO/TECH CORE COMPETENCIES					
	C1: ITERATIVE	C2: COMM	C3: SPATIAL	C4: SYSTEMS	C5: ETHICS
1010	2	2	1	1	2
1020	3	2	2	1	2
1030	3	3	3	2	2
1040	3	3	3	3	2
1110	2	3	3	3	2
1120	2	4	?	?	?

Mapping faculty feedback of assumed/desired student proficiency levels within each core competency across foundation years

PROPOSED FOUNDATION YEAR STUDIO/TECH CORE COMPETENCIES					
	C1: ITERATIVE	C2: COMM	C3: SPATIAL	C4: SYSTEMS	C5: ETHICS
STUDIO A	1	2	2	1	1
STUDIO B	2	2	2	2	2
STUDIO C	3	3	3	3	2
STUDIO D	3	4	4	4	3
STUDIO E	4	4	3 or 4	3	3
STUDIO F	4	4	4	4	4

Aligning student proficiency levels as a progression within each core competency across foundation years

The Department of Environmental Design is moving into a restructuring of the core curriculum. With this in mind, we pivoted and renamed studios to be placeholders, i.e. replacing ENVD1010 with Studio A, for flexibility and anticipated adjustments to the studio sequence. This shift allows faculty to create assignments and lesson plans while focusing on a progression of student learning and skills, regardless of its positioning in the foundation years.

Phase 3: Analysis and Synthesis (April - May 2026)

Our intention with this project and research was never to keep it isolated or for personal use. The foundation year studio + TECH curriculum is a collaborative effort and the literal base for the subsequent growth of students within ENVD.

In April we shared our findings with our Co-First-Year Coordinators and agreed on moving forward with the proficiency matrix (based on Student Actions) across the first six foundational studios and an integration of TECH to support skills. Next steps in this realm include looping in current ENVD110 (Studio E) and ENVD1120 (Studio F) studio Coordinators to share the proposed framework.



Alignment and progression of student proficiency levels each core competency specifically within Studio + TECH. Core competencies are listed across the top in varying colors and proficiency levels progress from Beginning (lightest color tone) to Developing, Competent and Proficient (darkest color tone)

We expect there may be minimal changes to the Fall 26/Spring 27 studio + TECH integration this year, however we recommend immediate action that each studio Coordinator make a few minor shifts to test this framework, including adding studio behaviors from each core competency into their course syllabus, incorporating portfolios as a cumulative course deliverable, and focusing on assignment rubric evaluations that recognize the new core competencies. The portfolio would act as a means of assessment of student performance (looking at A, B and C grade ranges) and could be reviewed and measured (in May 2027) alongside the proposed (desired)

proficiency framework and new core competencies. We will also share a Dictionary of Terms, with faculty, that span each of our core disciplines and offer students a bridge between the core first-year foundation studios.

Crit / Desk crit

A one-on-one or small-group review of in-progress studio work at the student's desk. The everyday mechanism of studio feedback, distinct from formal reviews or juries.

Appears in: All four first-semester studios + ENVD 1110, 1120

Critical thinking

The ability to question, analyze, and synthesize information about a design situation before (and during) proposing. Often paired with 'creative thinking' in studio learning outcomes.

Appears in: ENVD 1004, 1010, 1020, 1040

D

Design process

The iterative sequence of investigating, proposing, testing, and refining a design. Every foundation course names it; not every course defines it the same way (see Part 3).

Appears in: All studios + Tech 1, Tech 2, Tech 3

Design thinking

A structured method that moves from empathy and problem framing through ideation to prototyping and iteration. Most explicit in ENVD 1010 and 1120.

Appears in: ENVD 1010, 1120, 1040

Dictionary of Design

A multi-phase assignment in ENVD 1024 in which students compile a personal glossary of historical and contemporary design terms. Notable as a precedent for the document you are reading.

Appears in: ENVD 1024

Excerpt from Dictionary of Terms

Subsequently, we anticipate a short presentation to faculty and staff at our Fall 2026 ENVD Orientation. We will share a brief summary of the project, how we approached our work, and the eventual outcome including Curriculum mapping visuals, the revised competency framework and new core competencies and recommendations for revision alongside a potential curriculum update.

Assessment & Results

This project provided some solid results that we believe will strongly impact our foundation curriculum in ENVD. With curriculum changes on the horizon, this new assessment will help us maintain cohesion of student experience and skill development while allowing flexibility and agency for faculty. Here is a list of what we feel are our major outcomes from this project:

- Identification of **five shared competencies** between all foundation level core studios, lectures and TECH courses
- Creation of **a common language** across all four disciplines
- Decent **participation from core foundation faculty** (despite constraints)
- Development of a **visual framework** and matrices

What was less successful was incomplete faculty participation (which strengthened our decision to remove lecture courses from our project), uneven worksheet depth (which altered a wider understanding of the core foundation curriculum and provided a limited ability to validate across all course types) and our initial scope was somewhat ambitious.

We learned that Curriculum alignment requires structured facilitation, not just shared goodwill. While we know quite a bit about the courses we teach (Val and Rachel) we require participation from colleagues to fully understand the implementation of a syllabus. We recognize that faculty have their own constraints and need more time and conversation, not just worksheets, to value the mapping opportunities that come from collaboration. And we are convinced that visual tools are essential for making curriculum legible, which was wonderfully supported by trace paper and colored pens to start and eventually charted in MIRO.

Assessment Methods

To achieve a final outcome for this project, we utilized the following assessment methods:

1. Qualitative analysis of syllabi and worksheets
2. Cross-course comparison of learning objectives, readings and lesson plans
3. Identification of overlaps/gaps between courses
4. Faculty participation via worksheets/course + student proficiency assessments
5. Iterative internal review between project leads via faculty worksheets

Excerpt from Curriculum Mapping Master document showing the overlap of Core Competencies and where they appear in foundation year studios, lecture and TECH courses.

Artifacts

The iterative process for this project utilized a wide range of tools to support a final outcome. Below is a list of what we used and links to working documents.

TASK	MEANS, METHODS, LINKS
Comprehensive collection of foundation year syllabi, course learning objectives and required readings for studio, lecture and TECH courses	Canvas, Faculty Participation, Workbook LM to evaluate and cross-reference content for specified objectives
Curriculum Mapping Master Document	Excel
Faculty Curriculum Customized Worksheet	Excel (ENVD1040 Example), Email, Video Link with worksheet instructions
Visual Mapping to collect, assess and analyze faculty feedback	Trace paper, pen + paper
Visual Mapping to organize and finalize curriculum mapping for foundation year studio + TECH course	MIRO

Reflection

Project

This project clarified that while our curriculum already contains strong content, its structure and logic are often invisible to students and unevenly understood by faculty. We needed a stronger coordinated roadmap that was written, verbal and graphic. This project changed how we think about the importance of a shared language between our distinct disciplines, our departmental need for identifiable and measurable shared core competencies, the role of early curriculum in shaping confidence and clarity for our department and the need to design not just assignments, but progression through the early years of ENVD. This project has also revealed the significance of a coordinated means of student evaluations, like a portfolio, and the potential coordination of syllabi format and a clear description of the progression of core competencies, as shared between studio, TECH and lecture.

Knowing what we know now, we might have altered or adjusted a few things as we approached this project. We would have built in a more structured faculty workshop earlier, reduced the scope of this project from the start (to just include studio and TECH courses) and potentially use visual tools earlier in the process. This project also highlighted that asking faculty to map their individual courses is much more than a routine administrative exercise, it requires a true cultural shift away from isolated teaching silos towards a collective, shared foundation-year vision. Navigating the varying depths of feedback and engagement from our colleagues wasn't a matter of a lack of interest, but rather a reflection of how deeply entrenched independent course structures become when faculty are balancing their own immediate classroom constraints. Moving forward, our curriculum alignment strategies must intentionally account for and facilitate this cultural transition.

Faculty Fellows Program

The final outcome of this project has been building within ENVD for years. The four first-year studio + TECH coordinators have been looking for a way to comprehensively and cohesively assess, understand and organize our foundation curriculum. The Faculty Fellows Program was the perfect way for us to make time and create structure for reflection of our major concerns and desires. The program offered a framework for testing ideas outside of immediate teaching demands and provided regular support in the form of fall lectures and spring meet-ups.

We will have an opportunity to fully teach with this new knowledge in the 2026/27 and 2027/28 academic years, but already we are receiving strong feedback from the coordinated faculty. There is a stronger feeling of confidence and clarity within our decision making and an ability to

review our curriculum not from an individual, isolated course standpoint but a larger, foundation year viewpoint.

Within the Faculty Fellows Program, we learned about the myriad of support and services offered to us at CU Boulder and more about the knowledge of individuals within the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). We also learned about adjacent faculty teaching at CU and what they are approaching as part of their teaching growth, which felt expansive and exciting, and comforting.

If we could ask for any changes within the Faculty Fellows Program, we might request structured time for cross-faculty dialogue, especially with anyone else who is working within a similar project scope. This could happen earlier or later in the process, or both.

Future Direction

We are very excited to see where this project will take our department. We will start with small course adjustments within the first six studios in the core foundation curriculum and the adjacent supporting TECH course. Assignments will directly respond to the progression of core competency proficiencies and portfolios will assess student outcomes, something our 10-series team coordinators will review in Spring 2027.

Our hope is to extend this mapping to the upper-division curriculum and consider a strengthening of the identified core competencies, or a more targeted upper-division set of competencies. These competencies can more directly impact student assessment, advising and portfolio development.

Thank you so much for this opportunity! We couldn't have done it without all the great support of the Faculty Fellows Program, the Center for Teaching and Learning, our ENVD Department support, the time and efforts of our co-colleagues, Emily Greenwood and Dean Bacalzo and our project facilitators, Amanda McAndrew and Kirk Ambrose.