MES alumna Jennifer Dunn (2014) recently completed her PhD in Environmental and Energy Policy at Michigan Technical University (MTU). When she was back in Olympia to visit friends this summer, we were able to meet so I could ask her all about her research, her experience in a PhD program, and her advice for MES students who are interested in moving on to doctoral research.

Jenny knew she was interested in a PhD someday when she moved to Olympia from XXXXX to attend the MES program at Evergreen, but didn’t expect to find the right program as quickly as she did. On a trip out to Michigan as a second-year MES student, she met with a prospective advisor, Dr. Kathleen E. Halvorson at MTU who was taking on PhD students as part of a National Science Foundation grant through the Partnerships for International Research and Education (PIRE) program. Dr. Halvorson encouraged Jenny to apply for the program, and Jenny found herself committing to PhD research before she even completed the MES program.

The PIRE project that Jenny joined was titled *Sustainability, Ecosystems Services, and Bioenergy Development Across the Americas*, and included research on bio-energy in Mexico, Argentina, Canada, Uruguay, and the United States. Jenny was tasked with transcribing and analyzing interview data on community and policy from United States participants.

Biofuels have been a research interest of Jenny’s for many years. She entered the MES program with the intention of writing a thesis on biofuels, and was very intentional about picking courses that would help her gain the knowledge to do just that. She took classes focused on energy, environmental policy, GIS, and qualitative research methods, in addition to an internship with energy trade organizations. She explains her thesis project like this: “my thesis examined the biodiesel renewable fuel standard for Washington State. I specifically focused on the shortcomings and the next steps in promoting biodiesel use in Washington through the creation of new policy, or alterations in the renewable fuel standard.”

She continued in this vein for her dissertation at MTU where she researched bioenergy possibilities of a 17 million acre hardwood forest in northern Wisconsin. More than half of the acreage is owned by private land owners and Jenny researched, through interview and survey techniques the land owners’ thoughts on bioenergy, and the factors that might influence their interest in providing biomass as a fuel source to public utilities. She also designed an additional study that examined the policies around biofuels and talked with a variety of stakeholders about their thoughts on the possibilities for biofuel use, finding that some were really interested and excited about expanding renewable energy production, and others were frustrated and jaded about the starts and stops in the process. Jenny is currently developing her study for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

For MES students that are interested in pursuing a PhD, Jenny had some advice to share. Most importantly, **finding the right advisor is key**. It’s of course important to find a good research project, but don’t forget that you also need to work closely with your advisor for years. Learning to work with someone always comes with challenges. Trust and communication are very important in such a close working relationship, so it’s vital that you feel comfortable with your advisor before accepting a space in a program.

Jenny also mentioned that MES students “shouldn’t get overwhelmed by the feeling of playing catch-up.” Coming from an interdisciplinary program like MES, Jenny initially felt she was behind in some disciplines. But, she mentioned, you’re there to learn, and you shouldn’t be expected to know everything when you start. That is what your courses, your advisor, comprehensive exams, and research are there for.

I asked Jenny if she missed Evergreen when she started at MTU, and she laughed and said yes, “it was an adjustment going back to grades!” She got used to grades again, but she also found that she missed seminars, and the time for discussion and reflection she had in MES. Being in her PhD program also gave her a lot of appreciation for the opportunities for field trips and excursions she had in MES, saying “those were a really valuable part of the program.”

For future or current students who think they might be interested in doing research, Jenny suggests really taking advantage of the candidacy paper assignment in the second core class, Ecological and Social Sustainability to help you get a sense of what you’re really interested in.

Next up for Jenny as a post-doctoral researcher are several projects that she hopes will result in publications, including….and hitting the job market to find a job teaching, something she found she really enjoyed while she taught a Forestry Policy course at MTU. The course was made up of mostly forestry majors, and Jenny loved getting the chance to push them outside of their comfort zones. One of her favorite in-class assignments was for the whole class to write a forest management plan. Students were assigned to represent different stakeholder groups and advocate for the needs of their group to the class. The students really enjoyed the work of bartering and compromising to get their needs into the plan, but also realized how challenging it can be to make everyone feel included in one document. In reflecting on the class, she says “it was great to open their eyes to how policy can affect how forests are managed.”