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Program Report 2013-2014

The Graduate Program on the Environment

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Academic Achievements (written by Martha Henderson, Director)

Academic Year 2013-2014 was a highly productive year for The Graduate Program on the Environment (MES). After several years of rebuilding and rejuvenating the program, the year went well with little crisis or difficulties. Faculty, staff and students were attentive to their work with time to engage in graduate learning, teaching, research, and service activities. The sum total of the year’s work was strong academic achievement for students and faculty. Student and faculty success contributed to student retention and recruitment. Success indicated that the current mix of curriculum, faculty and student based activities will maintain a healthy and vibrant scholarly community.

Curriculum

Core curriculum, electives and thesis work became more integrated and interdisciplinary in the academic year. Much of the credit for focus on interdisciplinary work goes to faculty member Dr. Dina Roberts. Her background in a PhD IGERT program supported her ability to help our students leave their disciplinary homes behind and begin to think about environmental issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. Teaching in the Fall First Year core program graduate Conceptualizing Our Regional Environment, Dina created a number of learning opportunities for students to engage in richer problem solving and deeper philosophical questioning about the nature of environmental issues. Her teaching partners, Dr. Kevin Francis and Dr. Erin Martin, each contributed to student learning about the regional issues of the Pacific Northwest, and provided a positive entry for new students to the Evergreen pedagogy and expectations for graduate students. The strongly led core program laid an excellent foundation for the class’s work throughout the year.

Winter and Spring Quarter core classes were also excellent learning opportunities for students. The first year class completed the required candidacy paper in Winter Quarter and moved into Research Design and Qualitative Methods in Spring. In addition to core classes, each faculty taught an elective in their area of expertise. Ecology and social science electives were filled during each quarter. In the past, Geographic Information Systems was taught as an introductory course in Fall Quarter. This academic year, the elective was taught as an advanced class in Winter Quarter with the hopes of not only providing graduate level GIS work but also supporting thesis students who were using GIS as a research method. The class was relatively successful and met the identified goals. There may still be a need for an introductory graduate level GIS course. It may be possible to have an intro course for MES and MPA students in Fall Quarter and the advanced course for MES students in Winter Quarter. Increasing numbers of thesis projects that incorporate GIS is very promising.

Drs. Carri LeRoy and Ted Whitesell focused the 2nd year students in their last core class, Case Studies, on examples of research and completed thesis projects. Their work with students produced a class ready to begin their own thesis work for the rest of the year. I highly commend both faculty for focusing student work on the role of literature reviews, appropriate methodologies, possible funding, and timelines for effective thesis work. Students had signed (by faculty readers and the Director) thesis prospectuses at the beginning of Winter Quarter. The attached pie chart of thesis topics shows a range of interdisciplinary topics with an equal distribution between natural and social sciences. Energy and resilience continue to grow in terms of student interest and thesis research.

Students were required to attend a thesis workshop as well as work with their readers throughout the thesis quarters. The workshop also included presentations by the Assistant Director about job searching and success. Students found these sessions very helpful as they began their completion and exit from the program.

Faculty also supported Individual Learning Contracts and Internships. Both opportunities provided excellent learning and skill building experiences for students. A number of thesis projects were generated during internships and completed with cooperation from federal and state agencies.

A second international sustainability class was taught during the 2014 summer session. The class and trip to Fiji was taught by a recent MES graduate, Brittany Gallagher. Qualitative methods and research design were also taught in a summer session. I hope this material will be included as part of a core program in the future.

Student Academic Achievements

Students are increasingly interested in participating in professional organizations. A group of students attended a graduate environmental sciences conference in Canada. Individual students attended professional meetings in the PNW. One student received an award for research and poster presentation. MES students hired to work in the Sustainability in Prisons Project also engaged in professional work and received national recognition. We are very fortunate to have a good working relationship with SPP and its campus director, Dr. Carri LeRoy. SPP internships have played a vital role in professional development, paid internships and thesis research work. A relatively high number of graduates found professional employment with federal and state agencies following graduation. One graduate will continue her education in an energy PhD program at Michigan Technical University.

Service to Program and Community

Faculty, staff and students engaged in productive service activities both on and off campus. Assistant Director, Gail Wootan, led a successful TEDx program on the Anthropocene. Students, through the Master of Environmental Studies Association, organized a well-attended Rachel Carson Forum. Faculty members participated in MES faculty meetings and sponsored activities as well as campus activities. Dr. Kevin Francis agreed to become the next MES Director. He took on the planning of future curriculum and hired faculty to fill curricular needs.

Student Recruitment and Retention (written by Gail Wootan, Assistant Director)

Just as in the academic portion of MES, the recruitment practices remained essentially unchanged from the previous year since we had finally determined our best recruitment practices since my arrival in 2010. As usual, the focus was on nonresident recruitment, which was done through web marketing and various national events. This year was a year for determining the events that are worth our limited recruitment dollars. For 14-15, a focus will be on California fairs/schools (such as the California Diversity Forum, UC Santa Cruz, and Humboldt State University). The other primary fair that should be attended on a yearly basis is the National Council on Undergraduate Research, which was in Lexington, Kentucky in 2014 and is luckily in Spokane for 2015. For every fair I attended, I managed to include local university visits. I intend to continue this practice for future fairs. Gail Wootan, the Assistant Director, primarily focused on nonresident recruitment and web marketing, just as in the past year. Attending more school fairs means that we are building an inquiry pool that is 2-4 years out. The “fruits of our labor” may not be seen until 2016 and beyond.

The program continued to hire 3 ambassadors (and has done so for 14-15). This has definitely impacted recruitment and retention. Not only do prospective students get to talk to current students on a regular basis, but current students are given leadership positions in the program. They also helped plan our second annual admitted student day, which continues to improve yield, especially of nonresident students.

2013-14 also saw us change our paper newsletter to a blog, as recommended by Jana Fischback, our communications assistant. This has allowed us to have more timely news and I use it regularly to showcase to inquiries the highlights of the MES experience.

Due to all of these established recruitment efforts, MES received around 650 inquiries for Fall 2014, and currently have 81 applicants, the highest number of applications we’ve seen since Fall 2002, if not before. Nonresidents continue to be a larger percentage than the other graduate programs, although not as large as Fall 2013, causing me to think that Fall 2013 was a blip in our annual numbers. Our goal is to maintain a new cohort of 45 students every year. It is not clear yet if we will reach that goal for Fall 2014, but we are very close as of July 2014.

For 2014-15, we will implement a new customer relationship management system called Salesforce. I had acquired 10 free licenses of this very powerful database and am spending my summer setting it up. This will make our recruitment more direct, personalized, and efficient. It will also free up a lot of my time that is spent on entering information into several spreadsheets, which I hope will lead to me being able to spend time on strategic planning.

As for retention, in Fall 2013, a total of 40 new students enrolled. In addition, the total headcount of MES students in Fall 2013 was 90, slightly below the previous year since we are graduating students much more quickly and have almost graduate all of our “amnesty” thesis students. The average FTE for 2013-14 (Fall, Winter, Spring) was 81.6 (target was 60 FTE). We are expecting to see around 35 students in Case Studies, our second year Fall core program. The class will be made up of second year and third year students. If we get 45 students in the Fall 2014 cohort, I expect our Fall 2014 FTE to be similar to Fall 2013. Spring 2014 saw 23 students give their thesis presentations, and almost all officially graduated in Spring quarter. Those that did not finish are expected to finish in Summer 2014. As mentioned above, retention continues to stay strong due to excellent academic preparation, thesis support, conference attendance, student awards, and multiple paid internship opportunities. Please refer to the MES Demographics table and undergraduate major pie chart for more information about enrollment.