Tyrus Smith

Tyrus Smith completed his MES in 1997. He has been a faculty member at The Evergreen State College since 2001. Currently, he teaches a variety of environmental studies and environmental policy courses, and leads student learning in research and statistics at the Evergreen Tacoma campus.

At Evergreen Tacoma, students work with a faculty advisor from their admission until their graduation, and Tyrus regularly advises up to 24 undergraduate students annually. He sees his advising position as a platform to help guide students so they draw their own conclusions about their education; it is his job to ask the right questions as students explore different ideas and opportunities during their education. MES is excited to announce that Tyrus will be joining the MES faculty team in the 2018-19 academic year!

When pursuing his MES, Tyrus worked at the Washington State Commission on National and Community Service, administering AmeriCorps dollars all over the state. He says he didn’t plan on pursuing a PhD when working on his Master’s degree. He thought he would continue working in public service and government, but opportunities and timing led him to apply for a PhD program at George Mason University, where he studied Environmental Science and Policy, and graduated in 2003.

He remembers the people best about his time in MES. He recalls clearly the faculty he learned from, and the people who supervised his thesis research. His thesis looked at the environmental justice impacts of the recently passed Hope VI Initiative by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Tacoma (where he grew up and lived). He did a variety of interviews and studied public health data to investigate how housing displacement in Tacoma, as a result of the Hope VI legislation, exacerbated various environmental justice issues like lead exposure and indoor air quality for the tenants of low income housing developments. His thesis topic was timely, relevant, and personal to him because it focused on his community. This is a good recipe for deeper learning in his opinion – students have a better chance of remembering their work and carrying it with them if there is some level of personal connection.

Many MES students and applicants express concerns about the job market for environmental scientists, especially as the Trump administration has shown a lack of support for science around climate change, environmental protections, and renewable energy. Tyrus’ advice here is to remember that this is not new. He recalls the strong environmental activism during the Reagan years and how this seemed to abruptly end with the election of Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992. Tyrus believes there will always be work in environmental fields, and that state and local opportunities are continually growing. Tacoma, he mentions, is building capacity around environmental planning and sustainability. People who are interested in working in the environmental sector need to be creative and think about what they want to do – there are options, but students may not be considering everything available to them. He says, “The definition of the ‘environmental field’ may expand or may have already expanded beyond what students are considering.”

This necessary independence and ingenuity are areas where students will definitely grow in the MES program. MES is very flexible, and provides less explicit direction than many traditional graduate programs, forcing students to grow and think about their own interests and ways in which to pursue them. Tyrus acknowledges that some students need a more concrete idea about what they are interested in pursuing in MES to move forward. His advice for students struggling as they work to focus their studies or develop their thesis question is to look for connections. “This is a benefit of MES and environmental studies in general. Students are allowed and encouraged to see connections in different ways.”

That connection, between disparate disciplines like ecology and economics, to lived experience and familiar topics, is vitally important for students to remember as they develop skills and prepare to graduate from MES. Tyrus’ take on the mission of MES and program graduates is this: “if you can’t communicate your knowledge to laypersons, then how valuable is your knowledge? It is our responsibility to convey science in a way people can understand. Don’t use your knowledge as a weapon. Use it as a tool to make positive change.”