

**Program Performance Review
MS in Environmental Studies Program
California State University, Fullerton**

February 27, 2017

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Overview

This document is a summary report of a one day external review of the Environmental Studies Program (ENST) at California State University, Fullerton. The review is based on meetings with Dean Sheryl Fontaine, Associate Dean Lynn Sargeant, Program Coordinator April Bullock, and Graduate Advisor Andrea Patterson. Additionally, the review team met with other stakeholders including tenured/tenure-track faculty who teach in the program or serve on the program council, part-time lecturers, and administrative staff. We also met with two ENST graduate students and observed the ENST / CHEM 492 Sustainability Course. Based on the site visit and the program's 2017 self-study document, we submit the following commendations, challenges, and recommendations.

Description of the Program

The MS in Environmental Studies Program at CSUF is an interdisciplinary graduate program that is housed in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, but not in any one department; it is governed by a Program Council made up of representatives from departments in five different colleges from across the university. Because the program is not housed in a department, it is not associated with an undergraduate degree program, nor is there a core faculty with primary teaching duties associated with the program. Leadership for the program is provided by a program coordinator and an academic advisor, part-time positions (equivalent to one course release per semester) currently held by two tenured professors who are elected by the Program Council. A majority of the ENST courses are taught by part-time faculty, many of whom work as environmental professionals. Tenure-track faculty involvement in the program includes: the program coordinator and academic advisor; teaching several ENST courses each year; teaching

courses in their home departments taken by ENST students; advising students on their thesis and projects; and serving on the Program Council.

The academic requirements of the program are fairly flexible, with 3 required core courses (ENST 500, 510, 520; 9 units), 9-15 units of ENST elective courses (ENST 595T, 596, 599), and 9-15 units of cross-disciplinary electives taken from other academic programs. Students select one of two tracks within the degree program: the Environmental Sciences and Technology track is more focused on the natural sciences and engineering, while the Environment and Society track is more focused on the social sciences. Students are encouraged to select elective courses that match their academic interests and professional goals. For much of its history the program required a culminating experience in the form of a thesis or project; recently the program added the option of a comprehensive exam in order to allow more flexibility for students to complete the degree. The ENST program has been in existence for almost half a century, and has graduated scores of environmental professionals, many of whom hold leadership positions in many agencies and organizations in Southern California. In recent years the number of students in the program has ranged from 50-76 (headcount), with 14-28 new students enrolled per year. A large proportion of students take courses on a part-time basis (1-2 courses per semester), and take more than 2 years to complete the program. Most students have full-time jobs, and consequently most ENST classes are offered in the evening.

Commendations

1. Environmental Studies (ENST) is a strong interdisciplinary program with participation from numerous faculty and multiple colleges. Faculty and students alike are excited by the interdisciplinary nature of the field and the program.
2. The program has maintained its mission and its enrollment despite fluctuations in both the economy and program leadership. Despite an approximate 20% downturn in enrollments over the past 4 years, there is still a large number of students enrolled (n = 51 as of Fall 2016), demonstrating continued student interest in the MS degree program.
3. The recruitment of practicing professionals as part-time lecturers is a selling point for the program. In addition to their rich knowledge and expertise, many of these faculty recruit new students to the program, as well as help to place students in career-level positions after graduation.
4. Alumni hold leadership positions at a variety of organizations in Southern California and beyond, and clearly have had successful professional careers.

Challenges

1. Program stability is challenged by recent changes in academic coordinator and advisor positions.
 - a. Large fluctuations in admissions and enrollment over the past several years seem to be related to changes in program leadership. Previous periods of administrative turnover (4 program coordinators in the past 10 years) are correlated with low enrollment (e.g., a low of 14 new students enrolled in 2014-15).
 - b. With turnover in administrative positions comes a lack of institutional knowledge, and the need to “re-learn” how to effectively manage the program. This is

especially the case because the program does not have any core faculty who are intimately working in the program on a day-to-day basis.

- c. Administrative turnover in the coordinator and advisor positions presents a potential challenge for students, who, by and large, are attending school part-time, and whose time to graduation from the program (range = 2 to 5 yrs) is longer than a given program coordinator and/or academic advisor's appointment.
2. Current program leadership maintains, and works to improve, the status quo, but limited resources are restricting their ability to work on large tasks (e.g., curriculum development, website and handbook revisions) or growth projects (alumni network; internship/community engagement). The structure of the current administrative/academic leadership is not sustainable, and burnout seems imminent. Both the academic program coordinator and advisor contribute an inordinate number of hours to make the program work (well beyond what is expected for a 3 WTU course release per semester), yet, at times, are merely running in place. Of particular concern for the health of the program is the scheduled sabbatical of the program coordinator in Spring 2018.
3. The Environmental Studies Program has no full-time core faculty. In other words, there are no "faculty lines" exclusive to the program. All participating tenure-track faculty (including both the academic program coordinator and advisor) are housed in other departments. Thus, creating incentives for faculty from other departments (and in some cases, from different schools within the university) to participate and contribute to the growth of the program is a challenge.
4. Students report a difficult time in finding faculty advisors and academic mentors. This has, in many ways, isolated some students within the program itself and prevented others from realizing their full potential. Faculty involvement appears to be limited for several reasons:
 - a. Since ENST is a joint degree program in and of itself (i.e., a "non-department" housed within HSS), faculty often address the needs of students from their home departments/colleges before participating on ENST-specific student projects or theses.
 - b. Lab-based projects often are expensive. The program provides up to \$300 in funds per student that can be used to purchase supplies, but this is usually insufficient to cover the costs of the research or project. Faculty members then must secure funding from their home department or their own grants/sponsored projects, but faculty often must prioritize supporting students in their own department.
 - c. Faculty members' home departments may not recognize service to the ENST program in the context of retention, tenure, and promotion.
 - d. Because they are in separate buildings, on campus at different times, and do not have shared events, it can be difficult for students to get to know faculty (see #5 below).
5. The multidisciplinary, cross-college collaboration of the Environmental Studies Program is both a strength and a weakness. Faculty and students are excited by the

interdisciplinary topics addressed by the ENST curriculum, however, specific challenges noted throughout our visit include:

- a. Academic backgrounds and levels of preparation amongst enrolled students vary greatly from one another.
 - b. Overall lack of physical interaction amongst faculty and students in that these two groups rarely see each other outside of scheduled classes and office hours. There is a lack of an academic “home/community” (by students and faculty alike) within the greater campus context.
6. The Environmental Studies Program does not offer an undergraduate program, minor, or certification, therefore all tuition revenue must come from graduate courses, which tend to have smaller enrollments.

Recommendations

1. Of highest priority is the need to ensure consistency in and support for the academic program coordinator and advisor positions. Prior to the current set of faculty leaders, high turnover and ineffective leadership caused volatility in enrollment and student support. With changes in leadership, there is a real potential for program collapse. Based on the assumption that the overall workload is less, program coordinators generally receive fewer units of released time than their counterparts. For example, department chairs often receive 12-24 WTU of reassigned time per year. However, as demonstrated in this review, both the ENST program coordinator and advisor are still required to complete the same tasks (albeit, perhaps on a smaller scale), and they generally have less access to staff and other resources. The tasks are often made more difficult because of the lack of core faculty in the program. Additional released time would create a more manageable workload for both the ENST program coordinator and the academic advisor.
2. Additional resources also are needed for outreach, recruitment, and alumni relations. The current program coordinator and advisor have plans to do this, but need additional support in the form of staff, student assistants, and additional time. Much of the planning and institutionalization of these activities need to be completed by program staff, however, and are over-and-above the day-to-day activities of running the program. One-time funding (e.g., 6 WTU for one year) to allow development of program materials and systems would go a long way to securing program sustainability. This one-time infusion of resources would serve to establish procedures and infrastructure that would add to the institutional knowledge within the program and better allow future leadership to take over the program without starting from scratch.
3. Staff support currently exists for the ENST program in the form of two staff positions who work for a number of different academic programs. While the current system seems to be working well, there exists the potential for staff time to be usurped by one or more programs at the expense of others, especially because staff are housed in the office of one department. To ensure staff support remains strong, and staff are not overloaded with work, it may be beneficial to develop a written agreement or plan for divvying up the responsibilities and time commitments of administrative staff. By all accounts staff are currently meeting all expectations and requirements of administrative support; however, additional administrative support would greatly benefit the ENST program coordinator

and academic advisor. For example, the academic advisor currently spends a large amount of time requesting and reviewing data on student enrollment prior to the start of the semester in order to insure that students' are enrolled in the classes they need. This process involves manually searching for the class schedule for each individual student in the program; this work occurs outside of the academic year, i.e. during the late summer and winter intersessions. Additional administrative support for tasks like this could reduce the burden for program faculty. We recommend that program faculty compile a list of administrative tasks that could be completed by staff, and the College work to insure that additional staff support is available.

4. We recommend setting targets for enrollment and program growth, and attempting to plan course offerings several years in advance. Confidence in enrollment targets would allow faculty from across campus to better plan their involvement in teaching courses for the program. Additional resources to establish a better recruiting network (especially making use of alumni in the region) would allow increased confidence in meeting enrollment targets.
5. Ensure that faculty from all departments are clear on opportunities, policies, and resources for involvement in the program. For example, what is the policy for stipends for serving as thesis/project chair? What resources are available to support student scholarship? What opportunities are available for teaching courses in the program, and how do interested faculty go about requesting to teach a course? Can alumni and environmental professionals serve on thesis/proposal committees or as chair? What are the duties and responsibilities for serving on the Program Council? Prepare a guide for program faculty that clearly explains the opportunities and responsibilities. Use this guide to recruit new faculty into the program.
6. Some programs have had success with developing an advisory council comprised largely of alumni. A group like this may have the energy and resources to initiate and maintain recruitment and fundraising efforts. More work to connect with alumni for fundraising may help the program provide mini-grants to support student-faculty research, and provide potential mentors for internships, projects, and theses.
7. Faculty devote time and energy to programs they believe in and are excited about. Regular interaction (even once per semester) outside of faculty council meetings would be useful. To build support and excitement, the program could consider an end-of-the-semester symposium/summit where students, faculty, and alumni can showcase their scholarship (e.g., talks, poster session, informal sharing). Each class could schedule this into the syllabus and students could interact with both students and alumni. This would contribute to faculty/alumni/student sense of belonging to the program and encourage collaboration.