

Connecting the Abstract with the Concrete: A Proposal to Develop ES&P Travel Courses

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Vision and Rationale

The Environmental Science and Policy Program proposes to create two types of travel-based courses that will provide an evolving set of opportunities for students, faculty, and alumnae to examine environmental issues in an interdisciplinary context. A central goal of these courses is to illustrate broad environment-related concepts and issues by exposing course participants to concrete situations in relevant locations. Specifically, we will develop issue-based courses in which participants will travel to locations where important environmental issues are especially pertinent, thus connecting abstract concepts to a shared set of experiences to deepen the learning experience. The travel courses present a forum for place-based learning, where the place is the hub around which knowledge and understanding of the environment and sustainability will be built.

Overview

We will offer one semester-long and one short (e.g. January term) course each year. The specific topics and destinations will depend on ES&P faculty expertise and interest. The courses will be created and taught by two or more members of the faculty, who will arrange meetings with local stakeholders and experts, design field experiences and develop other “on the ground” instruction at the site. For both models, the courses will bring together perspectives from different disciplines that address the same issue. As such, we expect enthusiastic interest and participation by a diverse group of students, faculty and alumnae.

1. Team-taught Semester-long Courses

Under this model, students will enroll in an ES&P course that will focus on varying aspects of one specific environment-related issue. The classroom component of such courses would include instruction by faculty members from different disciplines that would introduce students to relevant theoretical perspectives and specific information pertaining to the issue and location to which the class will travel. Students would produce research project/papers to be presented during a final class symposium and compiled in extended abstract volume.

2. Short Travel Courses

Like the semester-long courses, the short travel courses will be organized around specific environment-related issues. For these short courses we envision some limited classroom

instruction to introduce the topic and location and intensive instruction “on the ground” by Smith faculty and local stakeholders. Short travel courses will be open to students, faculty, staff and alumnae and will thus foster relationships between these constituencies.

Examples

Issue: Ecotourism and Sustainable Growth

Illustrative Place: Monteverde, Costa Rica

Ecotourism typically is defined as travel to places where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Yet economic growth associated with ecotourism can potentially stress the ecology and natural resources of the ecotourist destination itself. Exceptions may exist if development is managed with an eye toward sustainability. The tropical montane cloud forests of Monteverde, Costa Rica are a popular ecotourist hotspot, and the forest ecology and water resources exemplify a delicate balance among climate, hydrology, habitat and development. A semester-long course with an inclusive 10-day field trip to Monteverde will examine the different relationships between tourism, the environment, sustainability. In Monteverde, students will witness aspects of the regional hydrology, ecology, and economy and develop multi-disciplinary short projects that will deepen the understanding of challenges behind sustainable development in a developing country. We expect such a course will attract a diverse group of participants that will bring perspectives from geology, engineering, sociology, anthropology, biology, economics, Latin American studies, and public policy, among others.

Other Examples of Issue-Based Travel Courses

- Environmental Restoration (Florida Everglades)
- Water Conflict (Colorado River Basin)
- Environmental Justice (Washington, DC)

Both semester-long courses and short travel courses will achieve the following goals:

- Bridge the curriculum with the co-curriculum.
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss issues with local stakeholders.
- Broaden opportunities for students to strengthen their abilities to observe and engage in basic research in a field setting.
- Attract participants from diverse economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Bring together faculty from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

Staffing and Resources

Successful implementation of these two travel-course models will require support for travel costs for students and faculty. A course-development stipend for faculty leaders will provide incentive for creation of a variety of course topics, particularly if team-teaching by the leaders constitutes as a course-overload.