

Environment & Society Departmental Assessment Plan

(Updated September 2012)

Upon the creation of the Department of Environment and Society (ENVS), faculty members identified a series of learning goals, as well as attitudes and behaviors that would reflect those goals and the skills, abilities, and knowledge areas that students would possess as outcomes of an educational program directed toward the learning goals.

Our assessment plan is intended to monitor our progress toward achieving the learning goals. Each course is linked to specific learning or attitudinal/behavioral outcomes, and instructors are asked to ensure that their course-specific learning objectives are directed toward an appropriate subset of those outcomes. *[See the document, "Matrix: Curriculum and Program Learning Objectives," found in the Assessment portion of the ENVS website, for a table showing how specific courses relate to particular outcomes.]* Through measures obtained each semester, as well as at the end of each student's time in the department, we can monitor whether our program remains directed toward our chosen objectives.

Program Goals and Learning Outcomes

We have identified four broad **learning goals** that flow directly from our departmental mission. We currently identify 30 **learning outcomes** (attitudes, behaviors, abilities, and knowledge content areas) that should reflect progress toward our curricular goals.

Our **programmatic learning goals** are that students who complete ENVS academic programs will be able to:

- Analyze complex, real-world problems regarding human-environment interactions;
- Understand and integrate ideas about human-environment interactions from the ecological, social, and physical sciences;
- Sustain an increased desire for lifelong learning;
- Lead purposeful lives.

Skills & Abilities: ENVS graduates will be able to ...

- Analyze complex problems
- Think logically and critically
- Think creatively
- Employ scientific reasoning and methods
- Find, evaluate, and use appropriate information resources and technologies
- Analyze problems at multiple spatial scales
- Communicate effectively in writing
- Communicate verbally through oral expression
- Communicate using visual media
- Work cooperatively in teams or small groups
- Work cooperatively within large groups or organizations
- Respect disciplinary diversity
- Respect cultural diversity

- Integrate social, biological, and physical science knowledge in natural resources and environmental problem solving

Knowledge – ENVS graduates will have gained and can apply knowledge drawn from and/or pertaining to ...

- Social sciences
- Biological and ecological sciences
- Physical sciences
- Economics
- Natural resource and environmental management issues and problems
- Natural resource and environmental policies specific to the Intermountain West, the nation and international jurisdictions
- Processes, purposes, and means of communication
- Conflict management
- Mathematics and statistics
- Identification, inventory, mapping, classification, and monitoring techniques

Attitudes & Behaviors – ENVS graduates will be equipped to ...

- Exhibit professionalism
- Adhere to ethical principles
- Identify future natural resource and environmental problems or concerns
- Engage in processes of scientific discovery
- Participate in public debate and social change
- Have a sense of civic responsibility

Assessing our Progress: Course-by-Course

Assessment of our educational program in the Department of Environment and Society is based on two sources of information:

- Course evaluation instruments administered in each course at the end of every semester; and
- Exit interviews conducted with students when they complete their degree requirements.

At the end of each term, beginning in 2002 and continuing through Spring 2011, students in every course with an ENVS or GEOG prefix were asked complete a survey which asks them to rate the degree to which each learning outcomes (at the time there were 34) had been met by that course. This exercise occurred in addition to a university-administered course evaluation that measured course and instructor effectiveness. Students were told that if a course has not met a particular objective that may be perfectly acceptable – no class could address all 34 objectives – and that the survey was designed to help us do two things:

- Assess the degree to which the course achieves the objectives it is *designed to achieve* (as evaluated by the instructor who designed it); and
- Assess the degree to which the overall Environment and Society curriculum is able to address all 34 learning objectives.

To avoid confusion with a standard course and teacher evaluation, the surveys were given on a different day toward the end of the semester. After the conclusion of each semester, results of the surveys are compiled. Instructors of each course were asked to use the data as a *formative* assessment – i.e., to evaluate whether their course was meeting their specific learning objectives. At the departmental level, we wanted to learn whether the overall academic program addressed each of the 34 learning outcomes at some point in the curriculum. [*The ENVS Assessment website includes two documents, “2008-2009 Outcomes Data” and “Data-Based Decisions” that describe how these surveys were used.*]

This approach was taken because the university’s evaluation instrument was entirely *summative*, intended to evaluate how USU students viewed their courses, their instructors and the methods used by those instructors. Results were used as part of the faculty evaluation process, and student comments on the backs of the paper score sheets often provided useful insights for faculty to improve their instruction. However, that did not occur systematically, and the instrument wasn’t designed for that purpose, leading us to adopt the cumbersome system of two student evaluations each term to obtain a *formative* evaluation that could be used to improve curriculum. Unfortunately students did not always appreciate added burden, and we were not always confident that they took the exercise seriously.

In 2011 the university instituted a new course evaluation system created by assessment experts at the IDEA Center, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help colleges and universities improve learning, teaching, and leadership performance. This instrument is both formative and summative. Like the ENVS surveys, the IDEA evaluations measure the extent to which each course meets the stated learning objectives (as listed in course syllabi). It also offers students a chance to rate the course itself and the instructor.

Therefore we have discontinued our use of the ENVS-designed survey. Instead each faculty member can use the IDEA evaluation to assess whether his or her course is addressing each of the course’s most important objectives. The IDEA report also offers suggestions to faculty regarding features of the course to improve or maintain based on students’ self-assessment of what they have learned in the course.

Assessing Our Progress: Overall Curriculum

To evaluate the extent to which the overall program is achieving its goals, we also rely upon a second source of information: exit interviews. Graduate students are typically interviewed individually around the time of the thesis/dissertation defense, while undergraduates participate in focus group interviews during final exam week in their last semester.

The interviews for undergraduate students typically involve 3-4 students, preferably from the same degree program,. Students not only are asked about the four broad learning goals, but also what could be done to improve our success at achieving the learning goals and outcomes. Finally, they are asked what classes they thought were not particularly valuable

or useful for their future careers, and how these classes might be modified to render them more valuable or useful. Students are told at the beginning of each interview that their comments will remain anonymous, and will be compiled along with those of students in other focus groups for presentation to the faculty.

Graduate students are asked only two questions:

- What did you particularly like about your educational experience at USU and therefore would like to see maintained or enhanced? and
- Where do you think the greatest opportunities for improvement reside?

As with the undergraduate students, this information is compiled and synthesized for presentation to the faculty.