

Quo Vadis, Environmental Studies?

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental academic programs in institutions of higher education have been and continue to be monitored by an annual effort carried out by my students and myself. That effort has resulted in a series of annual publications the last one being Romero & Eastwood (2002)¹. According to that study there were 670 environmental academic programs in U.S. institutions of higher education as per March 2002. That study also shows a great deal of curricular diversity among those programs.

What follows is a summary of the trends of that programs and what that means for the present and future of the Environmental Studies Program at Macalester College. This is based on the presentations and conversations I maintained with representatives of about 42 other programs that attended the Inaugural Retreat on Crosscutting Environmental Programs organized by the National Council of Environmental Science. I believe that the programs represented in that meeting, ranging from small liberal arts colleges to large research universities, is representative of the body of environmental academic programs as a whole. This should be used, thus, as a portal to our own discussions of where we should go as a program at Macalester.

CURRENT TRENDS

1. *Number and scope.* There is a great deal of growth and diversification of environmental academic programs within institutions of higher education. A number of new programs have been created in the last few months and within those institutions that already had a program, new programs/tracks have been created. This is consistent with the information obtained by my students and

¹ Romero, A. & H. Eastwood. 2002. Not All Are Created Equal: An Analysis of the Environmental Programs/Departments in U.S. Academic Institutions Until March 2002. Macalester Environmental Review. Available at: www.macalester.edu/environmentalstudies/MacEnvReview/equalarticle2003.htm

myself in the past few months according to which the number of programs may increase for our next annual report from 670 to about 1,000. This explosive growth essentially means that a college or university does not have a competitive advantage for just having an ES program since hundreds of other institutions either already have one or more or possibly will have one. Therefore the nature and quality of an ES program, not the mere fact of having one, is what will attract students to an institution of higher education.

2. *Approaches.* As previously noted by us (Romero & Eastwood, 2002) and others², there is a great diversity of approaches from a curricular viewpoint. However, those approaches seem to be shaped not only by design but also by the own culture and resources of the colleges and universities where they are housed. At this point those that are truly interdisciplinary in nature (like Macalester's), although in the minority, are perceived as the true future for this type of programs.
3. *Campus-wide integration.* Because of the explosive growth of programs, they have required a larger effort to utilize campus resources by a better coordination of efforts with other departments. As a consequence of that, there is more participation of faculty from other departments via cross-listing of courses, team-teaching, and student advising.
4. *Campus ecology initiatives.* Now it is standard that all institutions that have a respectable environmental academic program also have strong campus ecology policies and practices. The reason for that is two-fold: (1) those projects are used as teaching tools and (2) an ecological conscious campus attracts students that consider their potential *alma mater* as an environmental responsible institution. The ES Program and the Campus Environmental Issues Committee at Macalester, together with some isolated initiatives by the students, have promoted a number of actions that include a state of the environment report for the college³ as well as some specific projects like the ones being carried out by our students in the current ES55 class. Macalester is signatory of the Talloires Declaration as well as of an implementation plan⁴.
5. *Funding.* Most respectable environmental academic programs in liberal arts colleges of our size have an operating budget of \$50,000 annually, with a maximum of \$150,000 (Middlebury College). The reason behind this figure is that unlike many purely academic programs, Environmental Studies/Science ones are usually involved in campus initiatives and require a lot of hands-on, field trip-based courses that tend to increase the costs usually associated with running a department/program.

² Maniates, M.F. & J.C. Whissel. 2000. Environmental Studies: The Sky is not Falling.

BioScience 50: 509-517.

³ See <http://www.macalester.edu/~envirost/Audits/enviraudits.htm>

⁴ See <http://www.macalester.edu/~envirost/tallories.htm>

6. *Reputation.* The better-known programs are so because of word-of-mouth reputation between both faculty and students. Macalester ES Program has a good reputation thanks to two factors: the annual report on environmental academic programs mentioned earlier and because of its journal, the *Macalester Environmental Review*, to which many faculty from other programs subscribe to. The report has made us known because we contact all the directors/chairs/deans of known programs for that report on an annual basis. After checking out the report, many read the web page of the program. That makes them read what is written in that report which in turn leads them to read the web page of the program. According to the people I talked to in the Santa Cruz meeting, Macalester's reputation comes from the fact that it was transformed from a one-course program with a minimalist view to one that expanded rapidly and included new courses with innovative teaching and research approaches. Another aspect that grabs the attention of other colleagues about our program is the fact that we have a strategic plan and that we try to maintain a quantitative follow-up on the state of our program. This seems to be unique among most if not all of the other comparable programs.
7. *College/University Leadership.* All participants commented that their growth of their programs was possible not only because of increased student enrollments, but also because the support from administration in those institutions that felt that students could only be well served by providing those programs with the necessary faculty and financial support.
8. *Diversity.* One of the aspects that impressed me the most of the Santa Cruz meeting was the number of environmental program leaders that belong to non-white ethnic groups. That included African-Americans, Native-American, Hispanics, and Asians (both Far East and Indian). They also commented on the increasing number of students of color majoring in environmental programs. I was amazed to learn about the popularity of these programs in tribal colleges.
9. *Alumni support.* According to the directors/chairs of the environmental academic programs represented at the meeting that had 10 or more years of existence, environmental alumni are among the most loyal and generous of their colleges and universities. According to their own studies, such loyalty and support derives from their participation in campus ecology projects that translated in what they call "a sense of place." We do not have a comparable experience at Macalester since campus ecology projects only started three years ago.
10. *Campus-wide environmental literacy.* A number of campuses have expanded their efforts in the area of environmental literacy not only by the reinforcing of their own environmental academic programs, but also by offering courses aimed to: a) integrate environmental themes in classes offered in most departments, from examples used in chemistry classes, to the inclusion of environmental readings in English courses, to the adoption of environmental themes in Arts classes; b)

- offering campus-wide environmental literacy classes; c) offering as an alternative requirement (to, for example, diversity or internationalism) an environmental literacy requirement.
11. *Student Funding.* Because their interdisciplinary nature, it is very difficult for any environmental program to have a single source of funding for student research. Therefore, their strategy has been to use sort of out-of-pocket funds (ranging from \$200 to \$2,000) to support student research initiatives.
 12. *Review Processes.* The general consensus at the meeting is that the best ally for the development of an environmental academic program is the opinion given by outside reviewers. Since these programs tend to be stretched beyond their own capabilities they provide not only good advice but also a powerful tool to request more support.
 13. *Team-teaching.* Team-teaching is considered essential in an interdisciplinary field like environmental studies. This is a common practice among institutions with respectable environmental academic programs and all, with very few exceptions, have found the administrative way to provide the faculty involved with the appropriate FTE compensation.
 14. *Experiential learning.* The hands-on approach at learning instead of the conventional lecture-based classes is becoming increasingly popular in environmental classes.
 15. *Faculty staffing.* Most successful environmental academic programs are not a “one-man show” but actually well staffed ones. In liberal arts colleges of the size of Macalester, that usually means three full-time, tenured/tenure-track faculty. As mentioned by one of the participants at the retreat, “that is the only way to escape the syndrome that one is running a farm by oneself.” The most commonly accepted practice is that all of the faculty members are exclusively within the environmental academic program. Experiences of sharing faculty are not generally good because they lead to turf wars and different opinions when it comes to tenure and/or promotion. Standard departments (regardless of what written policies state) tend to value scholarship more than teaching and more than service while for environmental academic programs, all three are equally important. The only case where a true sharing of positions works well across the board is Middlebury College. However, the culture of that college is different since interdisciplinary programs are centripetal while departments are subservient to that idea.

CONCLUSIONS

Environmental Academic programs are rapidly changing in nature and scope not only because of the lessons learned in the recent past but also because the competition for attracting better students has stiffen. These programs are becoming more and more

practical in their approach to problems, more holistic in their vision, and less classroom-lecture oriented in their methodology. They also integrate more profoundly with the day-to-day operations of their institution and create a closer bond with their main constituency, i.e., their students and therefore alumni.

If change is inevitable, even in academia where things never seem to change, environmental academic programs seem to represent the paradigm of such idea.