

February 27, 2024

#### MOTION

The Committee on Educational Policies and Planning moves to approve the proposal, originating from the faculty of the Environmental Studies and Sciences Program, to create an Environmental Studies and Sciences Department.

#### RATIONALE

The Environmental Studies and Sciences (ESS) Program has experienced significant growth in majors over the past decade, and we are now consistently among the largest majors on campus. Although national trends and student interest in environmental protection are certainly at play, we feel strongly this is also a response to and recognition of the educational opportunities we provide, the curricula we developed, and the range of skills and expertise of the ESS Faculty. The ESS faculty itself has also grown, and we have added two new tenure-track lines over that same period. The overall result has been an increase in the number and diversity of ESS-specific courses we offer.

The ESS Program feels it is time for the next phase in our trajectory and we (collectively) wish to become a full-fledged department. Indeed, the recent ESS External Review Committee report came to the same conclusion and provided meaningful justifications for this transition. Granting department status would be recognition of our stability and longevity at the College. Most significantly, ESS now has sufficient faculty to administer our curriculum and personnel processes without the need for a Steering Committee or Program Personnel Committee. Doing so would decrease the burden for external faculty (i.e., governance/service on the ESS PPC). The External Review Committee and report states that we are a model for ESS Programs nationally, and our transition to a department follows the natural progression of top-tiered programs, where the collaborative, cooperative spirit with the broader campus community remained intact following the transition. The evolution from an ID minor to a department also appropriately acknowledges the effort that so many talented staff and faculty across campus contributed to building the ESS Program.

Granting department status would greatly reduce faculty workload outside of the ESS Program. For instance, the PPC governance model currently in place requires significant time commitments and effort on the part of individuals from outside of the Program (faculty from Biology, Chemistry, English, Political Science, etc.). We now have sufficient faculty for self-governance. Our PPC members should have their time back, yet they will still interact with the ESS Department in other meaningful ways (e.g., teaching important elective courses at several levels in ESS curricula, supporting and enriching ESS student experiences through mentoring, etc.). Overall, a department transition embodies the natural evolution from an ID Program with a minor, to an ID Program with a major and a minor, to an ID Program with two majors and a minor, and finally to an ESS Department with two majors and a minor.

Since ESS is a dynamic field, we of course will remain inherently interdisciplinary, and as such, we will continue to collaborate, consult, and engage with departments and programs across campus to ensure that our students have a broad and robust interdisciplinary experience while at Skidmore. These continued interactions will also enrich the experience of students in departments and programs across campus. Overall, we see few if any downsides resulting from this proposed transition. Many of the past reasons for being an interdisciplinary (ID) program, such as too few internal faculty for adequate governance, coupled with an unbalanced dependence on other departments for delivering our curriculum, are less applicable now.

## **History and context**

The Environmental Studies (ES) Program at Skidmore College was established and unanimously approved by the faculty in 1992 as a minor in Environmental Studies. In 1999, a formal mission statement and learning objectives were established for the ES Program, and a revision of the ES minor and a strategic plan for enhancing the ES Program with a formal ES major followed. The ES major was approved by the faculty in 2001, with declared majors following one of two tracks: Social and Cultural Perspectives, or Environmental Science. In 2016, with a majority faculty vote, the two tracks became two separate majors, Environmental Studies and Environmental Science, and the program was renamed the Environmental Studies and Sciences (ESS) Program, which aligns with our major national professional association (the Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences).

When the ES Program launched in 1992, it was assembled with affiliate faculty from other college departments who taught ES-designated courses, along with heavy use of adjunct hires. The first faculty line dedicated to ES was created in 1999 (Karen Kellogg filled this position).

Today there are six faculty lines allocated to ESS (five tenure track and one non-tenure track, or about 1 for every 20 majors). The current alignment has two lines focused on natural science classes, two on social science classes, and two that straddle both.

Although our curricula embrace the interdisciplinarity that comes from having ESS-focused courses from across campus, an increasing amount of the ESS curriculum (24 unique courses in the catalog) is delivered by faculty within the program, and, based on assessment data, we have worked with faculty to eliminate courses that do not have sufficient environmental content. We continue to value and depend on courses from across campus, and we do not see that changing if we transition to a department. We have already discussed this with, and received support from, many of our campus affiliates, and Director Smemo has reached out to the remaining affiliates to meet and discuss any concerns related to the proposed transition. More about the student and academic components are discussed below.

## **Administrative structure, governance, and leadership**

The current leadership and administrative structure consist of an ESS Director, an Associate Director, an ESS Program Coordinator/Lecturer, and an Administrative Assistant (60% time to ESS). The ESS Director is a tenured faculty member and is nominated by the ESS faculty, under advisement of affiliated faculty, and officially appointed to a 2-year term by the Dean of the Faculty (DOF). The Associate Director is a tenured or tenure-track faculty member who works with the Director and is expected to assume the role of Director at the completion of the current Director's term (usually 4 years total), or when they become tenured. Historically, the Director position was periodically and necessarily filled by someone outside the ESS program due to lack of resources, but now we have sufficient faculty in the program to fill both the Director and Associate Director roles. We expect this structure to change somewhat during our transition, but not in a way that affects this proposal. This transition is also cost-neutral with respect to resources, and there are no changes in terms of space requirements or administrative assistants.

Because we initially lacked sufficient tenure-line faculty to make personnel decisions related to reappointment, tenure, and promotion, or other decisions normally made by a department, Skidmore required that a Program Personnel Committee (PPC) perform those functions. The ESS PPC is currently chaired by the ESS director and includes 5 tenured faculty from both ESS and other affiliated departments who are appointed by the DOF. Current PPC membership includes Kurt Smemo (Chair and ESS Program Director), Karen Kellogg (ESS), Nurcan Atalan-Helicke (ESS), Andrew Schneller (ESS), Bob Turner (Political Science), Michael Marx (English), and Steve Frey (Chemistry). The PPC members perform classroom teaching evaluations and jointly evaluate each ESS faculty member's teaching,

scholarship, and service, in order to write reappointment, tenure, and promotion letters, and make recommendations to the DOF. Because ESS now has five tenure-line faculty, there is no longer a need to constitute a PPC that includes non-ESS faculty.

Each ID Program at Skidmore also has a Steering Committee with members appointed by the DOF. The ESS Steering Committee, which consists of all ESS faculty and 3 outside faculty members, functions to advise and provide vision for the Program. This committee was very useful in the past as the program experienced rapid growth and worked toward providing enough courses from across campus to deliver our curriculum. The primary justification for the Steering Committee is that ID Programs are small and depend on that outside perspective, but the role of the committee and the inherent demands on outside faculty time has become more questionable as the ESS faculty has grown. This vision and administrative capacity can now be provided internally, but we will continue to work with and seek important perspectives from our affiliates across campus and to ensure our majors have access to robust interdisciplinary course offerings and that ESS continues to serve as a point of collaboration for the college.

### **Academic Impacts**

We do not foresee any impacts on student academic experience, outcomes, or navigation through the ESS majors. Students are currently able to fulfill the requirements of each major or minor by choosing from a diverse range of courses. We currently have a shortage of seats in classes due to increasing demand for courses and a growing number of majors relative to faculty resources. However, that is an issue that will remain unchanged by ID Program or Department status. It is true that ESS majors take courses outside of the ESS Program to fulfill the major, but that is common across campus as most departments do not have the breadth of expertise to cover all the foundational requirements needed. For example, Economics requires Math courses, Management and Business requires Economics courses, and many natural science majors require Chemistry and Statistics courses. The Biochemistry concentration in Chemistry requires a minimum of 24 and up to 27-28 of the 61 total credits required to fulfill the concentration to come from outside of Chemistry. Environmental Science majors can take as few as 14 credits of the 54 minimum credits required outside of the major (i.e., biology, chemistry, statistics, and GIS) and graduate on time. Most will take more, as they can choose 300-level science courses from a variety of departments, with many choosing to take Advanced GIS and/or study abroad. Except for their methods course requirement, it is possible for Environmental Studies majors to complete the minimum 41 credit requirement almost completely within ESS. Nonetheless, many choose a diverse suite of core and Cluster A classes offered by other departments, as well as during their study abroad experiences and internships for credit, for 9-18 of those credits. We have always encouraged our students to gain a diverse perspective from outside of the ESS Program, and an ESS Department (as proposed) will continue to collaborate, coordinate, and work with our affiliates. We will continue to foster those offerings, and communicate, manage, and coordinate our course schedules so that our students continue to have access to external courses, and we hope our affiliates continue to appreciate the value that ESS students bring to their courses.