

The Environmental Studies and Sciences Department

A proposal to the Committee on Educational Policies and Planning (CEPP)

Summary

The Environmental Studies and Sciences (ESS) Program at Skidmore College has considerably increased the total number of majors over the past 5 years; that trend continues, and we are now the 4th largest major 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 skills and uniqueness of the ESS Faculty. The ESS faculty itself has also grown and we have added two new tenure-track lines over that same 5-year period. The overall result has been a significant influx of research dollars, bolstered student research and civic engagement opportunities, publications in top-tier journals, and of course, 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 attached to this proposal) came to the same conclusion and provided many justifications for this transition. The ESS faculty certainly feel that we have earned an equal seat at the table, but the most significant reason might be related to faculty workload within and outside of the ESS Program. For instance, the PPC governance model currently in place requires a significant time commitment 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, and those PPC members should have that time back, yet still interacting with the ESS Program in many other meaningful ways. Overall, this 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 would remain inherently interdisciplinary, and we see few if any downsides resulting from this 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.

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. Current faculty members and their expertise, not including visiting and adjunct appointments, are:

- Nurcan Atalan-Helicke (Associate Professor)- Food and agricultural systems, sustainability, environmental governance, and international development.
- Kristoffer Covey (Assistant Professor)- Biogeochemistry, forest dynamics, and land-use change.
- Anne Ernst (ESS Program Coordinator and Senior Lecturer)- Plastics, stream ecology and ecological restoration.
- Karen Kellogg (Professor)- Aquatic ecology, energy, engineering and sustainability.
- Andrew Schneller (Associate Professor and Associate ESS Director)- Environmental education, policy/law, voluntourism, and environmental justice
- Kurt Smemo (Associate Professor and ESS Director)- Ecosystem science, biogeochemistry, and soil ecology.

Although our curricula embrace the interdisciplinarity that comes from having ESS-designated courses from across campus, an increasing amount of the ESS curriculum is delivered by faculty within the program, and, based on assessment data, we have stopped counting courses that do not have sufficient environmental content. ESS is now the 4th largest major on campus. We continue to value and depend on courses from across campus, and we do not see that changing if we transition to a department.

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 is expected to work with the Director and 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 effects this proposal.

Because we initially lacked sufficient tenure-line faculty needed to make personnel decisions related to reappointment, tenure, and promotion, or decisions normally assumed 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.

Request to CEPP

The creation of an ESS Department, in our opinion, is a prudent decision. It saves faculty service hours, we have enough internal resources to function as a department, and we think we will maintain the same spirit of collaboration in terms of course offerings from other departments and programs. This was a strong, unanimous recommendation by our external review team and is indeed the direction of ESS programs at many of our peer and aspirant institutions.

The ESS Faculty, with support from the Dean of the Faculty's Office, request that CEPP inform the Skidmore Faculty, at Faculty Meeting on November 3, 2023, that you have received this proposal. The suggested timeline that would allow a transition to happen prior to the next academic year is:

- CEPP alerts Faculty at November 3 meeting that a proposal has been received
- CEPP considers proposal and hosts one open forum in November
- CEPP introduces a motion at December Faculty meeting
- Faculty vote on motion at February Faculty meeting
- BOT approval at February Board of Trustees meeting