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Environmental Studies: The Interdisciplinary Undoing

PART ONE

The end of World War II coincided with the emerging environmentalist movement in the United States. The post war period demonstrated a shift in national ethos towards environmentalism, with the U.S. legislation as the Federal Water Pollution Control Act in 1948 and the first U.S. conference on air pollution in 1950, sponsored by the Public Health Service.¹ The environmentalist movement within the federal government was driven by a large change within the American public. Environmentalist previously perceived as hippy tree-huggers transitioned to being accomplished scholars, backed by novels such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or documentaries like *The Silent World*, premiering in 1965. By the 1960s, Americans began to think about their impact on the environment. This activism also occurred at the post-secondary level. Many colleges and universities introduced Environmental Studies (ES) courses within their existing departments, showing how other social sciences intersected with the environment. Yet, college and university ES programs were largely harmed from the interdisciplinary nature, and lack of a common definition and curriculum across institutions within the field of study.

The national emergence of the environmental movement began at a localized level. As environmental issues became prominent in public discourse, institutions of higher education were forced to respond. In 1969, a blowout of an offshore oil well triggered a major oil spill along the coast of Santa Barbra, California. This resulted in a range of responses to the event in

¹ Rex Weyler, "The Modern Environmental Movement" (web page) *Public Broadcasting Service*, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/earth-days-modern-environmental-movement/>.

government policy as well as changes within local post-secondary programs. Both the state and national governments passed legislation largely in response to the spill, including the California Environmental Quality Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, both in 1970, drawing attention to growing concerns regarding the environment. Moreover, one of the United States' first ES programs was established by faculty at University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) as a response towards these policy shifts and the localized environmental emergency of the oil spill. Some of the founding faculty recalled how ES students gained relevant real-world training as the local government enacted more environmental policies. Because of the groundbreaking nature of ES at UCSB, students were formulating real-life environmental impact reports to present to government officials.² ES students and faculty were leaders in their field, gaining a first-hand perspective on the local and national shifts occurring in environmental policy.

Along with this national shift in attitude towards the environment, student activism expanded throughout the 1960s and 70s. Students called on their universities to become more attuned to their social agendas while organizing many different student-based extracurricular groups related to their interests.³ This prompted many colleges and universities to create courses, programs, and departments focusing on Environmental Studies. As the nation shifted to a more environmentally focused mindset, this shift was championed in higher education mostly by individual faculty members. In 1970, only a few programs incorporated Environmental Studies, even at the graduate level. Many of the program leaders had advanced degrees in other areas of study but took an interest in Environmental Studies. Many of them were “senior, tenured professors, secured in the power structure of the university and free to study things outside of

² *Building a Movement: 50 Years of Environmental Studies at UCSB*, directed by Isaac Hernández (2020; Santa Barbara, CA: Mercury Press International), Vimeo.

³ John R. Thelin, *Going to College in the Sixties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018): p. 100.

their specialty,” so they had the academic freedom and institutional support to inquire about the environment.⁴ As a result, the proponents of this movement at the university level were unlikely collaborators with a common interest in sustainability and environmentalism in their respective fields. The founder of conservation biology, Michael Soulé, writes that these professors were “physical and life scientists who were concerned with toxicological and epidemiological effects of pesticides and other pollutants, and by social scientists who were concerned with the emerging fields of environmental policy, policy analysis and law.”⁵ With the foundation of ES programs coming from people such as UCSB’s Environmental Studies Department founder Robert Nash, it was clear how this field of study set up students well for dealing with issues in politics, business, management, or planning and architecture because they studied under a diverse array of faculty who founded their respective ES program.

Environmental Studies courses and curriculum by nature are very interdisciplinary, and seemingly limitless in material. Soulé lists around 59 potential topics and subject areas which could be covered in Environmental Studies ranging from soil ecology and pollution chemistry to water policy and economics.⁶ Many colleges struggled with how to integrate ES’ interdisciplinary nature into their academic offerings and develop the requirements for a degree. Most institutions specified the need for ES presence in the curriculum but did not offer it departmental status. Tufts University, claiming to lead the way in Environmental Studies, introducing the program as a second major in 1991, and stated its benefits to foster

⁴ A. Clay Schoenfeld, “The University-Environmental Movement Marriage,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 50, no. 3 (May – June 1979): p. 290.

⁵ Michael E. Soulé and Daniel Press, “What Is Environmental Studies?” *BioScience* 48, no. 5 (May 1998): p. 397.

⁶ *Ibid* Soulé & Press, p. 399.

environmental awareness in students, as well as “requiring very little budgetary support.”⁷ This sentiment of claiming ES ranks highly in the efforts of creating well educated whole people, yet often the programs are tacked on to previously established departments. The interdisciplinary nature of Environmental Studies in higher ed is essential to fully developing its topical areas, but it made its establishment in higher education very inconsistent and varied at each college or university.

Moreover, as the field of Environmental education developed over time, there was a push to make a consistent definition. One of the earliest definitions came from the United Nations organization UNESCO in 1976, where leading scholars were gathered to formulate a common definition. Later deemed the Belgrade Charter, the goal of environmental education is to “develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones.”⁸ Over time, Environmental education programs in the U.S. have largely structured themselves with this goal in mind, but at the collegiate level, some variation still remains. At the K-12 level, most programs include education about essential underpinnings such as systems, interdependence, the importance of where one lives, but it is harder to streamline those goals without as clear of a common definition at the collegiate level.⁹

Where does Environmental Studies programs stand today? From their founding largely in the 1970s and 80s, there are now upwards of 7,000 Environmental Studies alumna in 2019, with

⁷ Norton H. Nickerson, “Environmental Programs at Tufts University – Leading the Way in Environmental Studies,” *Journal of College Science Teaching* 21, no. 3 (Dec. 1991/Jan. 1992): p. 169.

⁸ UNESCO, “The Belgrade Charter on Environmental Education,” *Prospects* 6 (March 1976): pp. 135–136, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02220144>.

⁹ Nancy Simmons, “Towards Excellence in Environmental Education A View from the United States,” *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution* 123 (2000): p. 517, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005208814666>.

almost 20,000 people pursuing degrees in natural resources and conservation efforts.¹⁰ As the field is growing, more onus is placed on the students. These students pursuing ES are tasked with an expanding problem but are also given more support than ever before. Pace Universities ES Professor Robert Chapman calls on the academic structures of colleges and universities to streamline Environmental Studies to, “give it the academic respect that it deserves.”¹¹ As a result, what started from the activism of faculty now rests in the hands of students. While this is no small plight, the future of ES is not as dim as some scholars portray it to be. In response to Soulé and Press paper about the history and future of ES in higher ed, Maniates and Whissel note the adaptive nature of ES in higher ed. They state that multidisciplinary illiteracy results more from institutional failures than an inherent issue with Environmental Studies. Beyond that, the interdisciplinary nature foundational to ES can be a huge asset to its’ future, as the most credible programs are ones “That wear this awareness on their metaphorical sleeve.”¹² By owning their multidisciplinary nature, strong ES programs teach their students to do the same, promoting scholarship and collaboration across fields, disciplines, and programs. This will set up ES students well for tackling the complex problems of the future regarding the environment.

PART TWO

Serving from 1885-1917, Bowdoin President William Dewitt Hyde knew that the expanding college in Maine needed a guiding statement. He delivered the “Offer of the College,” woven into Bowdoin culture and history in many ways. The offer opens with two striking

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, “Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)” *National Center for Education Statistics* (Fall 2019). Table Prepared from National Center for Education Statistics (May 2021) https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_318.30.asp?current=yes.

¹¹ Robert Chapman, “How to think about Environmental Studies,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 1 (2007): p. 60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00544.x>.

¹² Michael F. Maniates and John C. Whissel, “Environmental Studies: The Sky Is Not Falling” *BioScience* 50, no. 6 (June 2000): p. 512, [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2000\)050\[0509:ESTSIN\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2000)050[0509:ESTSIN]2.0.CO;2).

phrases: “To be at home in all lands and all ages; To count Nature a familiar acquaintance...”¹³ With these words, Hyde imprinted his aspirations of a school intersecting sustainability, environmental consciousness, and education. His early 20th century focus in the U.S. on the natural world comes to fruition in a way he most likely would have never imagined. One step towards the materialization of this environmentalist mindset was Bowdoin’s establishment of the Environmental Studies program in 1972.

In 1970, the Bowdoin College administration appointed a committee to create an academic curriculum, department, or program for the study of the environment.¹⁴ Determining how specialized analysis in Environmental Studies likely fell in postgraduate-level work, along with weighing the budgetary limitations of the school at the time, the ES Committee could not feasibly endorse a separate department, new courses and a separate major in ES. Instead, the Committee recommended the creation of a coordinate major, a degree taken in conjunction with another course of study. This coordinate major in ES would consist of five classes related to the environment and one seminar specifically examining environmental policy.¹⁵ Mirroring that of William’s and Colby’s Colleges, the program’s goal was to increase an “awareness of the complexly interwoven problems that must be solved in order to establish a way of living that is compatible with the limited resources of a finite planet” and to prepare Bowdoin students for

¹³ Bowdoin College, “The Offer of the College” (web page), accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/about/the-offer/>. Adapted from the original "Offer of the College" by William DeWitt Hyde in 1906.

¹⁴ CEP Meeting Minutes, “Report of the Special Committee on Environmental Studies,” *Curriculum & Educational Policy Commission Minutes: Feb 1971 to March 1975*, (December 3, 1971) Faculty: records, minutes and reports, Series Number: A01.07.04, George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine: p. 55.

¹⁵ A Proposal for Environmental Studies at Bowdoin College in the 1980s: The Second Decade [Draft III], Folder 3.12.2: Environmental Studies Program, Box: Vol. 1, Series Number: 3.12, Bowdoin Archives: p. 3.

graduate course work or meaningful employments in ES following graduation.¹⁶ Bowdoin faculty agreed with the decision of the Committee and approved Environmental Studies as a coordinate major in 1972. To this day, ES remains a program at Bowdoin College.

From its foundation, the interdisciplinary nature of Environmental Studies was clear. Seen in the plethora of early majors Bowdoin students paired with ES. The first ES coordinate major choose to pair their environmental scholastic interests with English, while the following ES majors chose to bundle with Biochemistry, Biology, Chemistry, Economics, and Government studies.¹⁷ Also in the Committee's report towards the creation of the Environmental Studies programs was an emphasis on an introductory course which would broadly expose students to the wide range of materials relevant for graduate and professional options available for continued engagement in ES. Enrollment in this introductory course skyrocketed from 59 students in 1972-1973 to 107 students in 1973-1974 and 176 students in 1974-1975.¹⁸ Generating large student interest, the immense success of the early introductory courses allowed the ES program to develop and grow over the following years.

In the decade following its foundation, the Environmental Studies program received some continuous financial and administrative support. As a result of the programs' early success, the Bowdoin ES program grew in 1984 to include a director, program assistant, and establishes an ES administrative office. The programs first director was Dr. Edward Laine who joined Bowdoin following his position as an Associate Research Professor at the Graduate School of Oceanography at the University of Rhode Island.¹⁹ As many of the professors who taught the

¹⁶ Ibid. Report of the Special Committee on Environmental Studies: p. 56.

¹⁷ Bowdoin College. Office of the President. Annual Report of the President 1972-1975, Brunswick, Maine: p. 48-50.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Annual Report of the of the Environmental Studies committee, January 3rd, 1984, Folder: Environmental Studies, Box: Vol. 1, Series Number: 3.12, Bowdoin Archives: p. 1.

courses in the ES department were faculty outside of ES, Bowdoin's hiring of Edward Laine was an investment into more specialized faculty to help grow the program. Another element of expansion of the ES department at Bowdoin was its commitment to integrate with the students and clubs on campus. The members of the Environmental Studies Committee in 1985 were impressed with the ES Program Assistant's efforts of expanding the co-curricular programs. During the 1985-86 academic year, the ES program hosted a lecture series including speakers from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, the University of Maine Orono, the Sierra Club, and the Island Institute.²⁰ Additional community outreach included co-sponsoring activities with the Outing Club such as canoe trips, and a program that engaged Bowdoin students to the wide range of professional opportunities available in the environmental field. Post-graduate opportunity programming was highly successful and well attended by Bowdoin students as the ES department hosted "alternative Career Choices...Working for the State Government vs. Non-Profit Organizations... or Careers in Environmental Law" seminars.²¹

Around the same time, a donation in 1981 from local Mainers Irma and William Thalheimer gave the ES program a major step forward in increasing its research capacity. The Thalheimers donated a 118-acre peninsula on Orrs Island with the goal of "promoting the scholarly interaction of students with Maine's Coastal Environment."²² This land included two miles of shoreline into the Atlantic, a diverse mix of forests, fields, and wetlands. As Bowdoin students and faculty had previously maintained a field study presence with the Science Station on Kent Island, the various science departments were ecstatic for this new space. With regards to

²⁰ Annual Report of the of the Environmental Studies Committee (January 1986), Folder: Environmental Studies, Box: Vol. 1, Series Number: 3.12, Bowdoin Archives: pp. 3-4.

²¹ Ibid: pp. 4-5.

²² Bowdoin College Environmental Studies Program, "Thalheimer Fam Property" (1989), Folder: 3.31 Coastal Studies Center: Records, Box: Vol. 1, Series Number 3.31, Bowdoin Archives: p. 1.

the Environmental Studies program, the Coastal Studies Center gave the chance for students to learn “how to conduct topographic surveys... setting up tide gaging stations... [or] water quality sampling in cooperation with the Town of Harpswell.”²³ The Coastal Studies Center allowed the ES program at Bowdoin to expand its research potential and environmental reserves, lending the program to further adapt to change.

So where does Environmental Studies look like today at Bowdoin? The college has a renewed sense of commitment towards the environment which spills into the ES department. Bowdoin College now has an environmental mission statement:

The Bowdoin College community—being mindful of our use of the earth's natural resources, our impact on the environment of coastal Maine, and our responsibilities as members of a leading liberal arts college dedicated to serving the common good—recommit ourselves to environmental awareness and responsibility, and to actions that promote sustainability on campus and in the lives of our graduates.²⁴

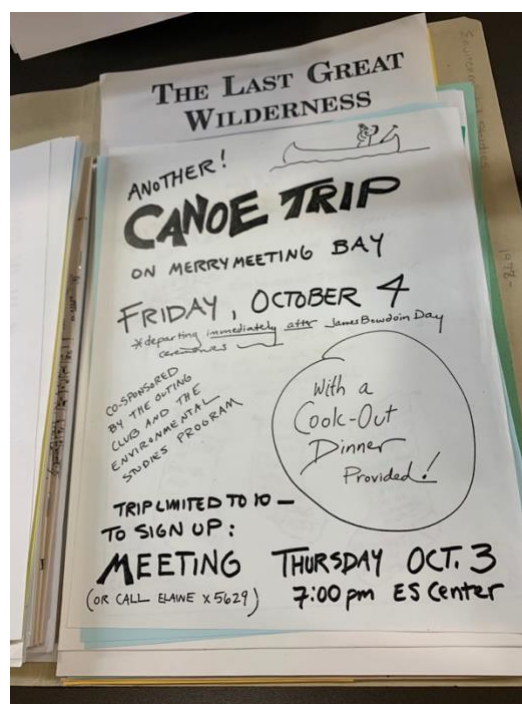
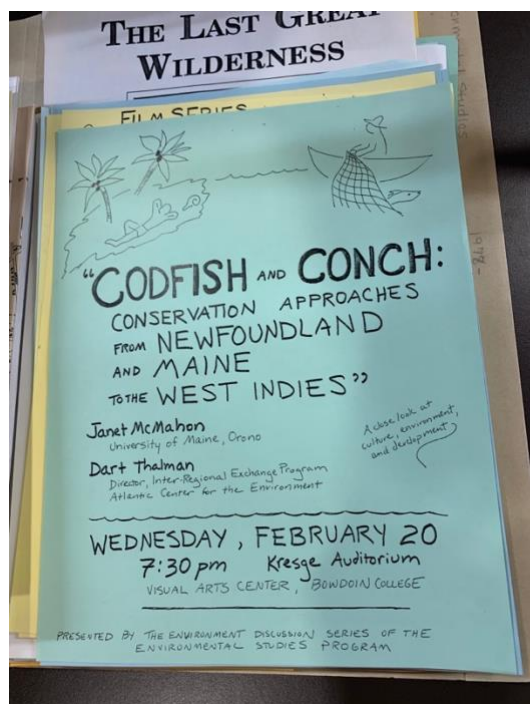
This commitment to the environment and sustainability resonates with the campus buildings offered to the ES program. In fall of 2018, Bowdoin opened the Roux Center for the Environment, a \$16.5 million project, to increase classroom space, faculty offices, and labs for the Earth and Oceanography Department and the Environmental Studies Program. Introductory ES classes remain sought after and requested courses on campus. However, as of 2022, the ES program has yet to reach departmental status and is still looked at as a coordinate major taken in conjunction with another field of study. While ES is still seen only as a program, it has claimed its interdisciplinary status at Bowdoin and strove to create a common definition, assisting its success. The ES program continues its dedication to post-secondary or continued studies within

²³ Woodlot Alternatives, Inc. & the Conservation Group, “Bowdoin College Coastal Studies Center: Facility Locations Studies” (February 1995), Folder: 3.31 Coastal Studies Center: Records: 1964-1997, n.d. Historical Material, Box: Vol. 1, Series Number 3.31, Bowdoin Archives: p. 112.

²⁴ Bowdoin College, “Environmental Mission Statement” (web page), accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/sustainability/environmental-mission-statement/index.html>.

the field, offering eleven fellowships in 2021 to students inquiring about the Maine environment. Since its implementation at Bowdoin, the Environmental Studies program has found ways to engage the campus, environment, and faculty, preparing students for a sustainable and environmentally conscious future.

Appendix: Photos of the lecture series and outing club sponsored events by the ES department in 1985.²⁵



²⁵ Environmental Studies Speaking Series and Field Trip Sponsored Events (1985), Folder: Environmental Studies 1978-, Box: Vol. 1, Series Number: 3.12, Bowdoin Archives.