

**When the Glider Hits the Wall:
Environmental Studies Meets the (Academic) Environment**
ACAD session, Thursday, January 24, 2008, 1:30—2:30 pm

A case study on revitalizing an interdisciplinary program in Environmental Studies, with commentary on the Science/Arts boundary from a UK perspective.

The BA in Environmental Studies was gliding along with relative ease: active, but low profile; surviving, but with minimal resources. It was being directed by the professor who had founded it ____ years ago, housed in the Science division with collaboration by some Liberal Arts faculty and the occasional Business course. It was viewed with some suspicion by the “hard sciences” and nearly invisible to the rest of the campus. As new deans came to the campus—Liberal Arts in 2004, Science in 2006—the program caused neither excitement nor anxiety. But the winds were changing.....

After two years of difficult negotiations, the campus was beginning a gradual shift from a 24-credit to an 18-credit annual teaching load. As is common in these transitions, the President called for a review and justification of all existing administrative assigned time. This included a number of interdisciplinary program directorships, which had struggled to become established and struggled to survive in the limbo between departmental silos. The gentle wind of complacency became a maelstrom of indignity and resentment as program directors were asked (quite reasonably, we thought) to describe their activities and visions for the future. Many program directors felt attacked and unappreciated—an all-to-familiar position for programs such as Peace Studies, Women’s Studies, and Multicultural Studies.

The director of Environmental Studies was not immune to the infectious paranoia. But he took the opportunity to re-focus the administration’s attention on the many activities in which the Environmental Studies program was engaged, beyond the curriculum: informal pizza discussions, extracurricular field trips, political engagement. He made a case for more support rather than less, and was open to suggestions. The Dean of Science—having spent many years at The American University and therefore steeped in Beltway strategy—saw an opportunity to buy time until the storm subsided: he called for a full review of the program, and appointed some new, rigorous but sympathetic science faculty to participate.

One year later (fall 2007), a recommendation emerged not only to preserve the program but to create a new Department of Environmental Studies. (A lifelong Democrat was this science dean.) The recommendation also called for significant curricular reform and greater collaboration among the three divisions of Science, Liberal Arts, and Business. As fate would have it, the campus welcomed a new president whose priorities include environmental awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration. The founder/director agreed to stay on for a year if he received a commitment to hire an external Chair for the newly created department – to which the President readily agreed. Unlike many case studies, this one seems to be ending on a positive note: the bluebirds of happiness are trying out their wings on the gentle breezes of renewal—IF all goes well.

Here is where we turn to you for suggestions of how to tread lightly into the future:

1. The department relies on the concept of cross-appointed faculty, committed to teaching one or two of their six courses per year in Environmental Studies. But cross-appointment has not been a part of our hiring procedures. What principles should guide us?
2. What should be the balance of Science, the Humanities, and Business in an Environmental Studies program?
3. What should be the profile of our new, external department chair?
4. How can our program best prepare students for future careers in which The Environment will be a powerful theme, but the roles of environmental specialists are still unclear?

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