

Cultivating the Environmental Humanities
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“Lessons Learned” White Paper

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Introduction

Rapid growth in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics ('STEM') programs has revolutionized Rowan University. While STEM research and pedagogy is critically important for devising technical solutions to environmental problems, STEM fields are not necessarily oriented towards understanding the cultural, ideological, and historical contexts in which environmental problems 'come to be' in the first place. For that, we must turn to the tools, approaches, and sensibilities of the environmental humanities ('EH').

In 2017, Dept. of Geography, Planning & Sustainability professor Jordan P. Howell and Dept. of English professor Dustin Crowley were awarded a highly competitive Humanities Connections grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project, called "Cultivating the Environmental Humanities", has three major components aimed at developing more holistic and comprehensive approaches to environmental problem-solving. First, the development of curricular structures (courses, experiential learning opportunities, learning modules, and an undergraduate certificate program in Environmental Humanities); second, a public research colloquium series highlighting intersections of STEM and EH work; and third, a faculty fellows group aimed at building a culture of collaborative research between STEM, the humanities, and social sciences.

What did we accomplish with our project?

We are proud to say that we met all of the goals and objectives of the project as we described it in our original proposal. Over the past three years we:

- 1) Undertook several curricular initiatives. In particular, we established in the first year of our project a new undergraduate certificate program in the environmental humanities. This also entailed establishing new courses and thoroughly revising several existing courses. These courses were housed in the departments of Geography, Planning & Environmental Studies; English; Philosophy and Religion Studies, and Writing Arts. See **Appendix A** for the full program curriculum. As we discuss below, it is a challenge to both create and populate non-major degree programs in the humanities, especially at an institution oriented primarily towards professional preparation programs (e.g., business, engineering, K-12 teacher preparation, health sciences/services). The courses have been well-enrolled, however overall enrollment in the certificate program has remained low.

In our second year, we also contributed to the development of additional courses (beyond those proposed in our initial application to NEH) and two additional degree programs, ensuring a prominent role for humanities courses and content around environmental study at Rowan. We are also pleased to note that we were able to work with colleagues in the Dept. of Philosophy and World Religions to create a course titled

“Spirituality and Nature”; worked with colleagues in Communications Studies to develop a course titled “Environmental Communication”; and collaborated with colleagues in Writing Arts to emphasize environmental issues in their course “Scientific Writing and Rhetoric.” Along with our colleagues in Writing Arts, led by one of our faculty fellows, Dr. Ted Howell (no relation to project Co-PI Jordan P. Howell), we contributed to the establishment of an additional undergraduate certificate program called “Writing for the Environment,” a four-course sequence that includes EH courses as both required and elective options. Finally, project co-director Jordan P. Howell worked with colleagues in the College of Business to create a joint degree program combining the BA in Environmental & Sustainability Studies with the Masters’ in Business Administration. Given the significant role of EH courses and content in the BA in Environmental & Sustainability Studies, it is exciting to know that students in this joint degree program will be exposed to humanities thinking as they also develop business and environmental problem-solving skills. In further deepening the links between the humanities, the College of Business, and environmental & sustainability studies at Rowan, Dr. Howell was also named Co-Director of a new campus-wide initiative called the Rowan Center for Responsible Leadership (housed in the College of Business).

- 2) Developed a public research colloquium series. Featuring one speaker per semester over years two and three of our project, we were happy to host on our campus (in chronological order from earliest speaker to most recent):
 - a) Dr. McKay Jenkins, Tilghman Professor of English, Journalism, and Environmental Humanities at the University of Delaware. Dr. Jenkins gave a talk titled “Foodsheds and Watersheds: Establishing Cross-Disciplinary Collaborations in the Environmental Humanities,” which was attended by approximately 45 students and faculty, representing disciplines from engineering to writing arts.
 - b) Dr. Bethany Wiggin, Founding Director of the University of Pennsylvania Program in Environmental Humanities and Associate Professor of German. Her talk was titled “Environmental Humanists & Climate Humanists: Partnerships & Program Building on American College Campuses” and was attended by over 60 students, faculty, and administrators.
 - c) Carla J.S. Messenger, Director of Native American Heritage Programs. Ms. Messenger shared a talk, followed by audience discussion, called “America’s Original People -- Keepers of the Land and Water”, and attended by over 80 students, faculty and administrators. This event was hosted in conjunction with the Rowan Center for Responsible Leadership and was heavily attended by students from the Environmental & Sustainability Studies program at Rowan.
 - d) Dr. Brooke Stanley, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Delaware. Dr. Stanley’s talk, called “Abalone and Empty Bellies: Narratives of Hunger in the Environmental Humanities” was a virtual affair due to the COVID-29 pandemic, but was still well-attended over Cisco WebEx’s videoconference platform, with over 20 students and faculty participating.

- e) Each of these events was very successful, and well-received by the campus community. All talks were followed by extensive audience questions and discussion. Several of the talks were recorded and posted to our project website, available here:
<https://earth.rowan.edu/departments/geography/research/environmentalhumanities/speaker-series.html>

- 3) Created a faculty fellows group to “pioneer” a new culture of cross-disciplinary collaboration around environmental issues and topics.
 - a) In our first project year, the cohort included:
 - i) Bill Carrigan (History)
 - ii) David Clowney (Philosophy & Religion)
 - iii) Ted Howell (Writing Arts / Engineering)
 - iv) Kauser Jahan (Civil & Environmental Engineering)
 - v) Jen Kitson (Geography, Planning & Sustainability)
 - vi) Mahbubur Meenar (Geography, Planning & Sustainability)
 - vii) Nate Ruhl (Biology)
 - b) Our second project year cohort included:
 - i) M. Katie Barillas (Experiential Engineering Education)
 - ii) Sarah Bauer (Civil & Environmental Engineering)
 - iii) Samantha Crown (Communication Studies)
 - iv) Stephen Fernandez (Experiential Engineering Education)
 - v) Ted Howell (Writing Arts)
 - vi) Jen Kitson (Geography, Planning & Sustainability)
 - vii) Mahbubur Meenar (Geography, Planning & Sustainability)
 - viii) Nate Ruhl (Biological Sciences)
 - ix) Nicholas Whiting (Physics & Astronomy / Molecular & Cellular Biosciences)

This aspect of the project was very successful. We learned that there are many faculty around our campus, in many disciplines, who are interested in and teach about environmental issues, and were actually looking for greater interdisciplinary fellowship relating to the environment! Our program, which we advertised to all full and part-time faculty members at our institution, received more than 40 applications to participate over the two years we ran the fellowship program. Fellows were asked to contribute to speaker’s events, develop and promote the certificate curriculum, and most tangibly, develop environmental humanities oriented teaching materials that could be used by faculty around the country (around the world?) in their courses. In this last regard we were very successful. Faculty fellows created excellent teaching materials, which have been archived and posted for public access to a dedicate page on our library’s website: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/oer/>. An overview of the materials that were created, along with brief summaries, can be found on our project website:

<https://earth.rowan.edu/departments/geography/research/environmentalhumanities/learn>

[ing-modules.html](#). We are proud to say that these environmental humanities teaching materials have been downloaded over 600 times by faculty and students around the world!

We are also proud to point to the new types of collaborations that have emerged from the faculty fellows groups, including several (successful) new research and scholarship projects as well as co-taught courses and collaborations.

- 4) Developed experiential learning opportunities for students. We had earmarked some of our project funds to support experiential learning opportunities for students interested in, or already studying, the environmental humanities. To that end we successfully supported two student internship opportunities over the course of our project.
 - a) In the summer of 2018, we collaborated with the South Jersey Land and Water Trust to create an opportunity focused on combining the ecological and conservation work of the SJLWT with a humanities perspective and highlights how these topics reinforce and enhance one another. Brooke Ottinger (senior, BA-Geography, Minors-Environmental & Sustainability Studies, Education) worked with SJLWT staff to research the natural and cultural history of the Oldman's Creek Preserve in southern New Jersey. Brooke conducted stream assessment and monitoring fieldwork as well as research into the cultural history of the Oldman's Creek area, producing an informational guide to the natural and cultural history of Oldman's Creek as well as a map showing SJLWT's stream monitoring sites that can be used in public environmental education programming.
 - b) In the summer of 2019, we collaborated with the PSE&G Institute for Sustainability Studies and Montclair State University "Green Teams" internship program to create an opportunity for students interested in environmental humanities to work with companies and municipal governments trying to address real-world sustainability problems. We utilized our project budget and project co-directors' personal networks to support the participation of five students from our institution in the internship program: two engineers, an urban planning student, a writing arts student, and an environmental studies student.

What challenges did we face?

One of the most enduring accomplishments of our project has been the establishment of the undergraduate certificate program in environmental humanities, but as mentioned earlier, creating and staffing the necessary courses across multiple disciplines and departments was challenging. We had planned, for instance, to have a course in History included in the curriculum options, but were ultimately unable to arrange the necessary faculty commitment. While interest in teaching courses focused on environment is high across the university, most faculty in departments like History, English, and Writing Arts have mandates to teach courses in

other areas, limiting their ability to commit to regularly teaching the classes needed for the certificate. Still, in the end we assembled an impressively cross-disciplinary offering, and will continue to look for opportunities to add new courses to the curriculum where possible. Indeed, as detailed later, we hope that the commitment to environmental humanities embodied by programs like the certificate will provide the basis for new faculty hires specifically within the environmental humanities.

In addition, working with large cohorts of faculty fellows, while critical to the success of the grant overall, posed difficulties with things like scheduling times for discussion groups, keeping to deadlines for module submissions, and the like. For everyone involved, this project was in addition to their normal load for teaching, research, and service, which put limits on the time available for collaboration; that said, our fellows were all very dedicated to the program, and we managed to work through the scheduling challenges successfully during both years with fellows.

In a similar vein, the large number of collaborators, coming from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, meant that we faced challenges with regard to setting standards for the learning modules they would produce. We ultimately decided that a variety of module types (regarding their length, components, materials, etc.) was a strength, so we focused instead on providing only a basic template (Overview, Goals, User Guide, Materials) and strong guidelines with regard to what core concepts, questions, etc. a module in environmental humanities should address in some way. These helped to ground fellows in shared “big picture” goals for the modules while allowing for diverse pedagogies and methods. As a concluding perspective, though, we feel that the diversity of approaches taken and content produced for the learning modules actually makes the overall collection of materials much stronger and attractive to a wider audience.

What impact did our project have?

As noted above, our project has had a lasting impact on Rowan’s curriculum, with courses and certificates that enable students and faculty to more thoroughly engage the environmental humanities across several departments and disciplines. This has already borne fruit with our students who want to use their studies to pursue environmental issues: for example, one recently graduated student who majored in Biological Science is working with one of the project’s faculty fellows in Biology on a publication aimed at “bridging the science-society divide” with regard to ecology, an interest and perspective that stems directly from the goals and methods of our project. While we have only anecdotal evidence about how these new courses, certificates, and learning modules have impacted the learning trajectory of students, we are heartened that the modules website has recorded over 600 downloads, and that attendance in environment-focused classes remains high. Much more so than before we began our work, students now have regular and meaningful opportunities to make environmental issues a focus of their studies.

In the same way, the faculty collaborations and focus on environment in research sponsored and encouraged by our grant have made important and lasting contributions to the research, teaching, and community outreach being undertaken at Rowan. As one example, Ted Howell, a fellow in the Writing Arts Department, collaborated on two separate projects with colleagues in the Department of Geography, Planning, and Sustainability: Jen Kitson and Mahbubur Meenar. Both projects exemplified a humanities-based approach to critical environmental issues and resulted in further collaboration. In one project, “Exploring Environmental Justice through Listening: An Environmental Design Case Study in Camden, NJ,” Howell and Kitson crafted a module that guided students to investigate the city’s environmental history and make listening to an underserved community a central piece of the urban planning process. The module material was used by other faculty in several sections of Rowan’s Sophomore Engineering Clinic course. In “Exploring Environmental Issues Using Eco Art,” Meenar and Howell created a module that foregrounded artistic work as essential to understanding the environment and helped students create their own works of eco art. These collaborations continued outside the creation of the modules when, in the summer of 2019, Howell, Kitson, and Meenar, together with other Rowan faculty and students, [led a two-part workshop in Camden](#) that helped residents of the neighborhood create photo collages that exemplified how they see their environment and told unique and compelling stories about their experience living there. Resident’s photo collages were incorporated into a larger Green Infrastructure Plan and prominently displayed along with the final draft of the plan at a [public presentation at the Camden FireWorks Art Gallery](#) in September, 2019.

In addition, we now maintain a robust and active listserv that includes many faculty from Rowan and other regional institutions for all the environmentally related activities on campus and in the wider community, which continues to generate interest and energy around these crucial issues, as well as continuing opportunities for cross-disciplinary and cross-university collaborations.

What comes next?

One way to more firmly entrench the work of environmental humanities at Rowan begun by this program would be with new faculty hires in the field, especially ones that are not confined to single departments, or perhaps even single colleges. It can be challenging to convince administration to take on these new, sometimes complicated hires, but having received this prestigious and sizeable grant from NEH demonstrated clearly and definitively the importance of this work, as did the eager engagement we had from students and faculty throughout its implementation. We are hopeful, then, that we can parlay this energy into faculty lines that might enable a substantial growth in our curricular and research opportunities in the future.

More directly, Jordan Howell has taken on a position as Co-Director for the Rowan Center for Responsible Leadership, a university-wide initiative that examines the role of business in society. In this role, Howell is applying the structures and insights from our Cultivating the Environmental Humanities project to develop teaching, research, and public engagement programs and materials relating to themes of responsible, sustainable, and socially progressive

outcomes for businesses and business education at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Furthermore Howell maintains his role is the program coordinator for the environmental & sustainability studies offerings at Rowan, a position from which he will continue to promote and supervise the Certificate program created as part of this project. As a part of the Center's public outreach program, Howell will emphasize interdisciplinary speakers and campus visitors, who reach across multiple disciplines including the humanities in order to address topics and themes at the core of the Center's mission.