

Executive Summary

WSU Department of Geography, Environment & Sustainability

Autumn 2024

The following is a summary of the self-study document, highlighting important points. For complete information, please refer to the full, self-study document itself.

Introduction

The Geography, Environment & Sustainability (GES) program at Weber State University is dedicated to providing students with a robust education in understanding the earth's diverse environments and the intricate relationships between human and natural systems. The self-study document evaluates the program's accomplishments, community engagement, challenges, and strategic objectives over the course of seven academic years: 2017-2023.

Program Overview

The GES program offers a comprehensive curriculum that includes three majors, three minors, three certificates, and seven tracks or emphasis options. The program stresses experiential learning through field trips, internships, community involvement, and hands-on projects, preparing students to tackle local to global environmental challenges and promote sustainability.

Achievements

- **Curriculum Development:** The department has introduced new courses focusing on climate change, sustainability, and especially Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies. It has also substantially updated nearly every course offered to incorporate modern tools, technology, and topics.
- **Student Success:** The program boasts high completion and graduation rates and successful placement of graduates in relevant internships, careers, and graduate schools, thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of its educational approach. Exit interviews and alumni relations confirm that the department prepares its graduates well.
- **Research, Grants, and Scholarship:** Faculty members have secured significant research grants and published their findings in journals and the popular press, contributing to the field's body of knowledge as well as including students in undergraduate research.

Community Collaboration

- **Sustainability Initiatives:** The program collaborates with campus and local organizations to promote sustainability practices, including community gardens, recycling programs, energy conservation, building and site planning, non-motorized commuting, renewable power, water saving, and many practical projects.
- **Environmental Education:** Faculty and students give lectures, conduct workshops, and lead educational programs on campus, in local schools, and in the broader community to raise awareness about environmental issues and sustainability.

- Internships and Fieldwork: Students have opportunities to intern with local government agencies, non-profits, and businesses focused on environmental management and sustainability. Field studies involve local ecosystems and communities, providing hands-on learning experiences.
- Research Collaborations: Faculty and students work with local stakeholders on research projects addressing community-specific environmental challenges, such as air quality, water management, and urban planning.

Challenges

- The USHE required reduction of Gen. Ed. Credit Hours from 37 to either 30 or 27 for Weber State, will severely impact the program. Currently, Geography teaches four Gen. Ed. classes (two each in the Physical and Social Sciences). The decrease in required credit hours in both areas will mean far fewer students in geography classes (currently more than 80% of our SCHs come from those four classes). We'll lose enrollment, course sections, and likely have to lay off most of our Adjunct Instructors.
- Major recruitment will suffer as we teach far fewer Gen. Ed. students.
- Many students will reach Weber State with their Gen. Ed. coursework nearly completed, or they'll be done by the end of their freshman year. This begs the question: What can geography student do with sophomore year? We offer very few 2000-level courses and count on our Gen. Ed. courses to attract majors (and funding).
- Resource Constraints: With declining SCHs, the program will face limited funding for new initiatives and faculty positions, which hampers its ability to expand and innovate.
- Enrollment Trends: Fluctuating (and likely declining) enrollment numbers, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising demand for online instruction, pose a challenge to maintaining program stability.
- Infrastructure Needs: There is ongoing need for updated laboratory, computer, and field equipment to support advanced research and teaching.

Strategic Goals

- Enhancing Curriculum: The program aims to develop interdisciplinary courses and expand online offerings to reach a broader audience, ensuring that students receive a well-rounded education. We're especially working toward stackable credentials and certificates that fit inside majors, lead immediately to employment, can be added to other majors, or pursued for post-baccalaureate training.
- Increasing Enrollment: Targeted recruitment strategies and partnerships with local high schools, community colleges, and especially online students are being implemented to boost enrollment numbers.

- Sustainability Initiatives: The program continues its committed to strengthening its sustainability efforts through campus-wide projects and community engagement, fostering a culture of environmental responsibility.

Conclusion

The GES program at Weber State University is dedicated to providing high-quality education and fostering a culture of sustainability. It has enjoyed a number of praise-worth successes. And despite facing some significant challenges, the program has outlined clear strategic goals to enhance its offerings and impact. Continued support, investment, and innovation are essential for the program's growth and success.

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