Environmental Science Graduate Program (ESGP) 3-year Follow-up Review

A three-year follow-up meeting was held between Andy Blaustein, Director of the ESGP and Vinod Narayanan, representing the Graduate Council on May 10th 2012. The meeting lasted approximately 30 minutes. Both went over the Action Plan and Andy provided updates on the actions taken towards addressing concerns in the Program Review. The Review Panel report and the Action Plan are attached for reference.

As a brief background, ESGP is an interdisciplinary program that is housed in the Graduate School. It is unique in that it is a Joint-campus program between PSU, OSU and UO. It has eight tracks of specialization- Biogeochemistry, Ecology, Environmental Education, Natural Resources, Quantitative Analysis, Social Science, Water Resources, and PSM in Environmental Science. The Program was reviewed in Spring (June 3rd) 2009 by a team consisting of Alison Power (Dean of Graduate School at Cornell), Susan Walls (Florida Integrated Science Center), and two members of the Graduate Council, Shawna Grosskopf (lead) and Vinod Narayanan. The overall recommendation was that the program be maintained at its current level. Several recommendations were made in the report to which the Director prepared an Action Plan. This action plan was subsequently discussed in a meeting with the Provost in 2009.

Current Status of the ESGP- The ESGP continues to flourish with a current enrolment of 58 students. Approximately 19 students have been accepted into the program for next year of which about 10 students are expected to show up. Andy Blaustein continues to be the Director of the Program, and a new Associate Director (25% FTE) has been added. A Program Administrative Assistant works with the Director and co-Directors in running the ESGP. The ESGP office was vacated for the COS Business Office in 2009 and is now housed in Geosciences. Students have their offices in Strand Hall.

Updates in each of the areas identified in the Review Panel Report and Action Plan are provided below.

- Funding Model-
  a. Uncertainty with GTA lines- “The Graduate School provides some funding for administration and other purposes, however, the main support for graduate students falls to the major professor or their departments. The College of Science has also provided funding in the form of GTAs for basic biology classes. However, the Dean of the College of Science has indicated that future GTA funding for students in this program is not guaranteed.”

3-year Update: The funding model remains the same. The Director mentioned that there is a new Dean for College of Science so he does not know about support yet per se but the Dean seems very supportive. There continue to be at least 6 TA lines given annually to ESGP and the Director believes that so long as the Biology Chair does not change, and
the demand for undergraduate biology courses continues to increase, this will continue to be the case. This year, ESGP was given 10 TA lines. “In other programs on campus, revenue from the professional side is used to subsidize the Master’s and PhD students.”

3-year Update- There has been no communication between the Directors of the ESGP and PSM programs about the issue of funding ESGP students with revenue from the PSM program.

b. “A related issue is the fact that faculty currently have little incentive to participate in the program except for the fact that they can get some good graduate students, particularly as major professors. Apparently some financial incentive has been given in some past years, which might address this problem.”

3-year Update- There is no major change in funding levels from the Graduate School; hence no incentives can be provided to the home Departments of participating faculty members.

c. “Although the program has set up its own web-based admissions, which is excellent, there are apparently still problems with incentives for faculty to participate in committee work. This again goes back into faculty buy-in for the program. It is recommended that the Director, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the Deans of the participating Colleges meet to discuss ways in which faculty engagement can be enhanced. Perhaps an IGERT and/or graduate internship opportunities could motivate faculty into participating more actively in the program.”

3-year Update- There is still lack of financial incentive for faculty to participate in committee work. Thus far, there has been no preparation of IGERTs and other collaborative proposals to boost faculty engagement.

- Curriculum-
  a. “Review tracks, streamline where there are low enrollments and redundancy with other programs”

3-year Update- A reasonable justification was provided for not reducing the number of tracks in the program. The Water Resources Science Director asked the ESGP Director to retain the Water Resources Track. Elimination of tracks might prove problematic since ESGP is a Joint-campus program. The director is working towards implementing a new track in Disease Ecology. The Director also proposed a track in Environment and the Humanities twice to Liberal Arts but has not received a response.

b. “Update course lists for tracks, perhaps with appointed track leaders and student input”

3-year Update- The list of courses is being updated regularly. There are no incentives for folks to volunteer to be track leaders.
c. “Keep web pages updated, including links to PSU and University of Oregon programs; additional staff or student worker help is recommended”

3-year Update- The Director has engaged the help of student workers to keep the webpage updated. It is however still difficult to find a link to the Joint-campus program on the ES website. The Director has assured that this problem will be fixed ASAP.

d. “Work with Deans to provide incentives for faculty participation in the program as major professors, committee members and core teachers”

3-year Update- There has not been a change in budget to the ESGP for financial incentives encouraging faculty participation. The Director does offer some form of support to students in the ESGP, be it in the form of travel grants or small research support (~$500).

One major issue at the time of review was that two of the faculty who were teaching the core courses in ESGP were leaving OSU. Since then, the Director has hired (using the existing budget) a part-time Associate Director, Carolyn Fonyo, to teach these core courses. This arrangement provides some permanence to the core course instructors. The Associate Director also helps the Director in reviewing graduate applications.

e. Joint-campus conference- 3-year Update- Each year, in spring term, students and faculty from UO, OSU and PSU take part in a Joint-campus conference in ES. The Director reported an issue with this year’s conference, which was to be hosted by PSU. At the last moment, the PSU Chair of ES decided not to host the conference citing financial reasons. The OSU Director and UO Director have since managed to convince PSU to host the conference; however, the conference will now occur in Fall instead of Spring 2012, creating logistical difficulties due to teaching commitments among others.

• “Collect consistent data on completion rates, time to completion and student placement after graduation. Also provide annual student reviews”

3-year Update- The new Administrative Assistant has started keeping a list of alumni from the ESGP in order to track placement. According to the Action plan, student reviews were being conducted for some students (~10 per year). However, the Director was burdened with performing all reviews. With the hiring of the Associate Director, this burden is to be shared in the future.

• “Consider moving core courses to fall term to build student esprit de corps, include returning faculty and students to fall orientation, encourage formation of student e-mail list, student seminar series and a formal ESGP Student Association”
3-year Update - A new Associate Director is now in charge of the core-courses. The Director mentioned that core courses remain in winter for a variety of reasons. Student offices have been provided in Strand Hall. However, this building is scheduled to be demolished perhaps next year and an alternate office space will need to be found. In order to build camaraderie amongst students, there was an initiation to have an annual dinner at the Associate Director’s house for ESGP students. Some students have organized get group togethers. There is an active student email list.

- “Have a consistent policy on requirements for students, including examinations and coursework”

3-year Update - The Directors reports that a consistent policy exists and is clearly stated on the website. However, implementation of the policy still needs work. Some faculty choose to ask for written examination of students, which is not stated on the ESGP guidelines.

- “Work with Deans, Chairs etc to ensure that ES students are on par with students in the participating units”

3-year Update - TA salaries remain low in ESGP, similar to zoology TA salaries. The Director has initiated travel and small research grants for ESGP students.