

Feasibility Report on Academic Opportunities for Graduate Students interested in Ecocriticism

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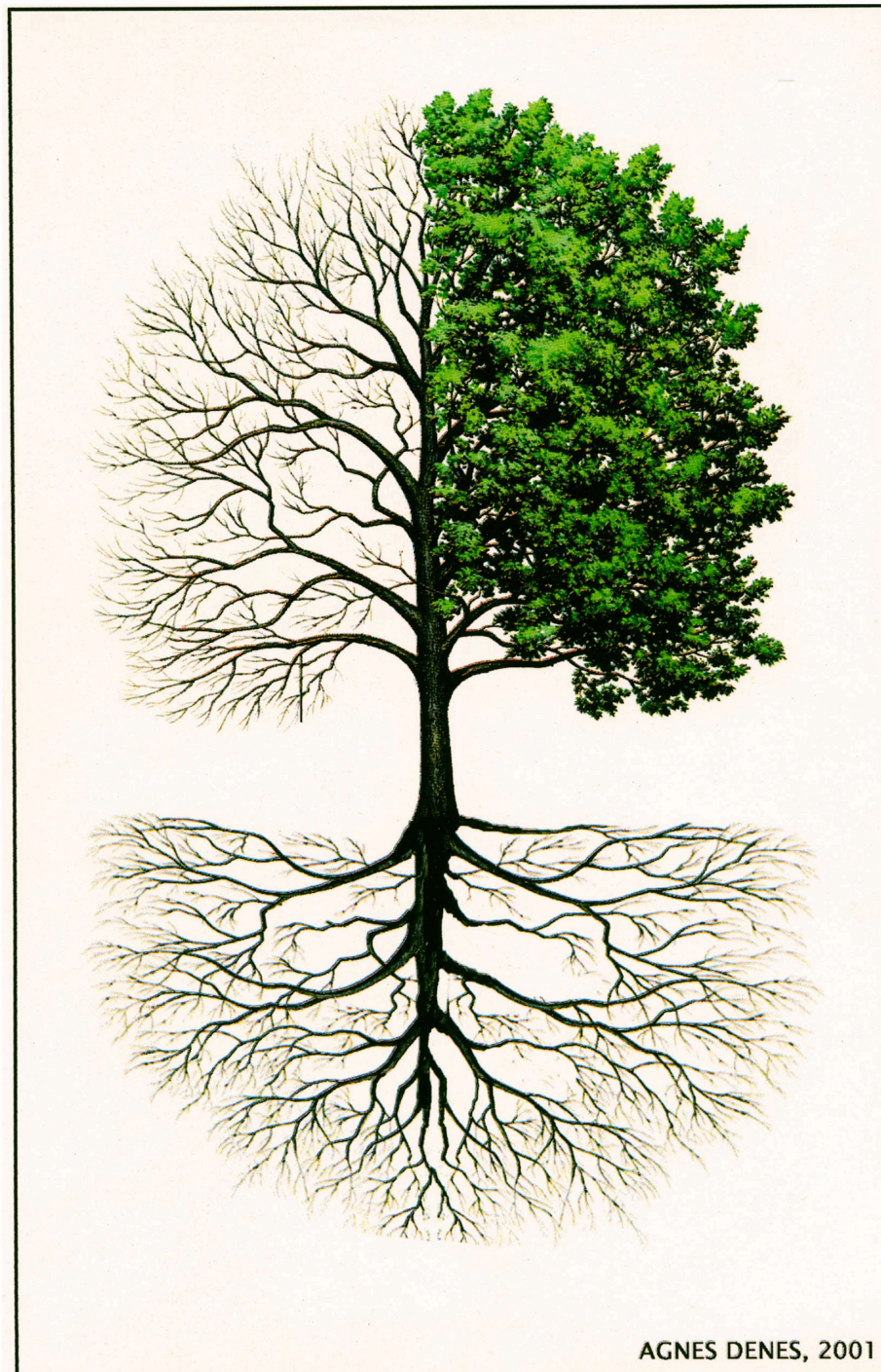


Figure 1

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Letter of Transmittal

Memo

Date: December 8th, 2009

To: University of Washington Board of Regents

From: Britta Kallevang, University of Washington Graduate Student, Scandinavian Studies

Subject: Completion Report for Feasibility Study on University Ecocriticism Programs

I have attached the completion report for a feasibility study on programs in literature and the environment in American universities. When I heard about the 2009 results of the University of Washington's (UW) Graduate School annual program review on students' interest and satisfaction with new and existing programs in the Sciences and Humanities, I approached the few UW faculty I know who are either interested or already active in the discipline. In doing so, I discovered that I am not alone as I struggle to define my academic specialty in ecocritical studies of Norwegian literature. Graduate students across the campus interested in ecocritical studies grapple with limited resources and lack of guidance.

I used the feedback from the dissatisfaction graduate students as well as my personal experience with university resources to research options for meeting ecocritical students' needs as they develop their academic niches. First, I defined five qualities graduate students in the discipline consider most important: access to qualified faculty, the option to specify focus as an M.A./Ph.D. student, career advancement opportunities/placement rate, funding opportunities, and the opportunity to work interdepartmentally. Next, I identified four models of academic programs of ecocriticism in use in American higher education today, each representing the criteria established in varying forms.

Based on the information I gathered I recommend that we at UW commit to establishing a program of literature and the environment within the English Department. I propose that in order to provide graduate students with the support the need that we make the literature and environment program open to both undergraduates as well as graduate students, a move that will attract more students, faculty and funding, and will ultimately provide an easier transition into establishing the program. With the support of an already established department, students will be able to work toward degrees in literature and the environment, a specialization which will help them secure a position in the field of their expertise. University of Washington faculty from a variety of fields with expertise in ecocriticism will then be encouraged to design curriculum and instruct courses in the new program. In this way, the university will progressively draw attraction to the program, from both prospective students and faculty. Funding opportunities should be as available to these graduate students as for graduate students of English Literature, with opportunities to teach in the Program on the Environment (PoE).

I recognize that the economic crisis has negatively affected UW's budget for new and existing academic programs, and appreciate that new funding may not be available at this time. However, I believe that this report demonstrates not only interest on the behalf of UW students, but also the need for the university's support in the institution of the program. I appreciate the opportunity to research options for improving the academic environment for students interested and already active in this innovative interdisciplinary discipline.

Executive Summary

“What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.”

Cheryll Glotfelty – Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

Still a relatively new academic terrain, ecocriticism finds recognition as a discipline worthy of funding on only a few university campuses, though its origins date further back than many literary criticisms used in academic circles today.

In the 1980's scholars worked to establish ecocriticism as a genre, and in 1990 at the University of Nevada in Reno, Cheryll Glotfelty became the first person to fill an academic position as professor of Literature and the Environment. Other universities have followed, but more often than not students interested in ecocritical studies must create their specialty themselves. A student may, for example, be required to scour her university's campus only to find opportunities in science-focused environmental programs, and the occasional special topics seminar in ecocritical studies of a world literature. Such a course might be offered under the Scandinavian Studies, Women's Studies, or English Literature department, and the ecocritical focus specified only in the professor's course syllabus, making it difficult for students to find.

At the UW students interested in pursuing ecocriticism as an academic focus are responsible for reaching out to PoE for class offerings and teaching opportunities. Only one English graduate student at UW has literature and environment as his focus.

With such an exciting and culturally appropriate academic discipline on the horizon, it is time to recognize and support ecocriticism's presence on our college campuses by investing in faculty experienced in the field and who are dedicated to the study of literature and the environment. If we do not, we risk not only the inability to change how we live in the ecosphere, but perhaps more importantly, never understand the reasons behind our neglect. At this time I suggest that we refer to university's mission statement that states that: “the primary mission of the University of Washington is the preservation, advancement, and dissemination of knowledge.” Why would we curtail students' options to, “develop mature and independent judgment and an appreciation of the range and diversity of human achievement” when we are dedicated to learning? Students who want to develop their ideas on how literature reflects our attitudes toward nature cannot do so effectively without your support.

Introduction

At a time when UW dedicates increasing resources to environmental studies and promotes the campus' 'green' features to prospective students, its established graduate student body often faces challenges that hinder their interest in exploring the broad sweep of ecologically oriented studies in their respective fields.

Ecocriticism, because of its interdisciplinary nature, involves academics in the sciences and the humanities. When the discipline is adequately supported, it serves as a point of conjunction for students, faculty, and visiting researchers from unlike academic backgrounds. The ability to bridge disciplines toward a common goal – working toward solutions to environmental crises – is a critical, if not attractive quality for a competitive research-focused university like ours.

I am conducting this feasibility study as a follow-up response to the 2009 results of UW's Graduate School annual program review¹ on students' interest and satisfaction with new existing programs in the Sciences and Humanities, headed by Stephen Hinds, Graduate School Council member representative for the College of Arts and Sciences. While I as a graduate student do not yet have permission to access the results of this recently completed review, Hinds has publicly stated that, "never before has the Graduate School received so much interest by students for an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment." The following report seeks to explore options for establishing a new graduate program in literature and the environment under the auspices of the English Department, and presents a recommendation for how to initiate a program in environment and literature at UW.

Topics that need attention but are not covered in this report include a study of financial resources available for implementing a new academic program, and the results of the 2009 UW's Graduate School annual program review of the College of Arts and Sciences.

¹ No such survey actually exists. I created the idea of the survey merely for the purposes of this assignment. Though Stephen Hinds as well as the Graduate School council both exist, I refer to his statement as though it were common knowledge on campus in order to support the case for the creation of a program on literature and the environment.

Research Methods

To better understand the situation for students of ecocriticism at UW, I performed the following research:

1. I explored how other universities have structured programs in ecocriticism. To do so I consulted the discipline's academic community, 'The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment' (ASLE) 2009 graduate handbook list for programs in literature and environment.

2. From this list of programs in environment and literature, I selected three models (in addition to the UW model) that would provide a wide range of program designs and attributes. One model, for example, requires that students work interdepartmentally, while another does not yet provide its English Literature students with the option to focus on literature and the environment as they earn their degree.

3. I identified the main criteria for a department that would satisfy the academic needs of students of ecocriticism:

- Access to and guidance from qualified faculty
- Option to specify focus as an M.A./Ph.D. student
- Career advancement opportunities/placement rate
- Funding opportunities
- Opportunity to work interdepartmentally

Results

In this section I present the results of my research.

1. Investigating the Extent of the Problem

This report responds to the 2009 results of the UW's Graduate School annual program review on students' interest and satisfaction with new existing programs in the Sciences and Humanities. Working without the exact results of this survey but with enough information to know that more graduate students at UW than ever before want support for ecocritical studies, I seek to explore options for establishing a new graduate program in literature and the environment under the auspices of the English Department.

2. Identifying our Options

I researched other American universities with strong programs in environment and literature, and selected three models in addition to the UW model, that would provide a wide range of program designs. The four models include:

- Working with the current UW model of ecocritical studies. Our university offers no program or course of study for students in the discipline. Graduate students must either enroll in the undergraduate offerings through PoE or approach departments of political science, philosophy and environmental sciences to get the experience they need.
- The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) – UNR offers the only graduate program in Literature and Environment (L&N) in the nation. The program offers academic mentoring, field-based courses, and requires interdisciplinary work of its students. Housed in the English department, L&N offers at least one and often two or three specialized Literature and Environment graduate seminars each semester, and has a dozen outstanding faculty who teach in the program.
- University of California, Santa Barbra (UCSB) – the English department does not offer its English Literature graduate students an emphasis in Literature and the Environment, its Graduate Colloquium in Literature and the Environment (GCLE) gives graduate students an opportunity to present papers, workshop dissertation chapters, and discuss seminal and recent work in the field of ecocriticism. In addition, faculty from other UCSB departments and schools, as well as from outside of the University, are regularly invited to speak to the group.
- Texas Technical University (TTU) -- graduate students in English Literature can choose to specialize in ecocriticism through the Literature, Social Justice, and Environment (LSJE) initiative supported by the department. The department's aim with LSJE is to engage students through historical, canonical and contemporary literature, and from an environmental perspective.

3. Determining Necessary and Desirable Criteria

I identified some common qualities of already established UW departments, including funding, access to qualified faculty, and options to specify focus, as well as qualities intrinsic to interdisciplinary studies like faculty that encourage students to work interdepartmentally. Students of ecocriticism, like students of comparative literature or history, are most successful when the criteria identified here are in place.

4. Evaluating each Model against Our Criteria

To make the evaluation as objective as possible, I designed a matrix (see table below). Included in the matrix is an explanation of how I scored each model on each criterion.

Matrix

Option	Criterion 1 Access to qualified faculty	Criterion 2 Option to specify focus as M.A./Ph.D. student	Criterion 3 Career advancement opportunities/placement rate	Criterion 4 Funding opportunities	Criterion 5 Opportunity to work interdepartmentally	Total Pts
Option 1 UW Model	4	2	5	4	10	25
Option 2 UNR Model	10	10	10	6	10	48
Option 3 UC Santa Barbara Model	8	2	7	9	7	25
Option 4 TTU University Model	10	10	10	8	8	46

Figure 2

Notes:

Criterion 1. Each academic model has at least one faculty member with expertise in ecocriticism. UNR and TTU received the highest scores because each had more than 10 faculty dedicated to the discipline.

Criterion 2. Models that offer M.A. and Ph.D. concentration in ecocriticism received 10 out of 10 points. UW received more than zero because students can conceivably tailor their studies to include a focus on ecocriticism. Students must take the initiative for creating their niche.

Criterion 3. UNR and TTU received the highest scores for criterion three because they offer specific opportunities for graduate students in the discipline. The other models offer some statistics like placement rate, but not specifically for students of ecocriticism.

Criterion 4. Each of the models offer some opportunity for gradate student funding. Those that scored highest promised the greatest financial support.

Conclusions

Three of the four academic models for the study of ecocriticism – UNR, UCSB, and TTU – find their roots in competitive academic systems, and are housed in quality English Literature programs. The UW English department, while also academically competitive, does not offer any track for students interested in literature and the environment.

When we analyze UW's presentation for students of ecocriticism against the criteria identified in this report, we find little to no resource options for these students. Students at UCSB can receive training through the English department, and the GCLE component. The program encourages students to petition for a Ph.D. emphasis in L&E, but as of yet, the department does not have one. Through the TTU English department graduate students can earn an M.A./Ph.D. in English Literature with an emphasis in ecocriticism. Students can receive an M.A. and/or Ph.D. degree in English with LSJE as their academic emphasis. Resources for graduate students in the LSJE program include access to experienced faculty and opportunities to work interdepartmentally.

At UNR, the model with the highest score, graduate students can receive an M.A. and/or Ph.D. degree in English with an academic emphasis in L&E. The program has fifteen faculty dedicated to the discipline internships are a required part of the Ph.D. program and optional for M.A. program. The program cooperates with UNR's Academy for the Environment in organizing conferences and bringing visiting speakers to campus, and the Great Basin Institute/Nevada Conservation Corps, based on campus and directed by one of UNR's L&E Ph.D. candidates, provides a variety of summer field courses and ecological restoration projects for L&E students to participate in. Literature and the Environment faculty members include founding officers and active members of ASLE, an international organization that serves as a bridge between our campus community and a vast network of scholars throughout the world.

Recommendations

I recommend that we at UW work with the English Department toward establishing a literature and the environment program. Under the English department, students will be able to work toward an M.A. and/or Ph.D. or B.A. in literature and the environment, a move that will attract more students, faculty and funding, and will ultimately provide an easier transition into establishing the program. University of Washington faculty who work with ecocriticism from their respective academic fields will then be encouraged to design curriculum and instruct courses in the new program. In this way, the university will progressively draw attraction to the program, from both prospective students and faculty. Funding opportunities should be as available to these graduate students as for graduate students of English Literature, with opportunities to teach in the undergraduate PoE, and conduct research interdepartmentally.

I recognize that this report is incomplete without detailed research into the university's financial resources. My intention with this report is to reveal the students' dissatisfaction with UW's failure to meet the demands of the growing academic discipline, ecocriticism. As a first step in establishing the new program, I hope this report has communicated this need, and has stimulated your interest in honoring UW's mission statement as the number of students interested in ecocriticism steadily increases. I hope, too, that this report has fulfilled its pedagogical objective in informing you about how the discipline serves as an intersection between the representation of our culture's attitudes toward nature, and the demand to change those attitudes as we face the degradation of the environment.

References

ASLE 2009 graduate handbook list for programs in literature and environment:
<http://www.asle.org/site/publications/graduate-handbook/programs/>

Denes, Agnes

http://www.firstpulseprojects.net/Strange-Weather-mt/2007/04/agnes_denes_uprooted_deified_t_1.html

Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

UW Graduate School

<http://www.grad.washington.edu/>

UW Mission Statement

<http://www.washington.edu/home/mission.html>

UCSB L&E

<http://lit-environ.english.ucsb.edu/index.html>

UNR L&E

<http://www.unr.edu/cla/lande/main.html>

TTU LSJE

http://www.english.ttu.edu/grad_degrees/LSJE_default.asp