



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98195

UW PROGRAM ON THE ENVIRONMENT

January 10, 2024

Dear Provosts, Deans, and UW faculty:

The University of Washington Program on the Environment (PoE) faculty are pleased to offer our response to the PoE 10-year Review (review) submitted on November 27, 2023 by the PoE Review Committee (Committee). We wish to begin by expressing our gratitude to the Committee—Katherine Aubrecht, Kerry Naish, Scott Slovic, and Richard Watts—for the hard work and thoughtfulness with which they prepared the review. Overall, we are pleased with the review and feel that it accurately reflects the excellence of our program, including our contributions towards environmental literacy across campus, while mentoring students through our high-touch, multidisciplinary major. Additionally, it honors the cherished collegial environment we have built, and appropriately highlights financial and structural challenges that we face. Although the review discusses the possibility of converting PoE from a program into a department (departmentalization), it does not focus adequately on the reasons we are considering this possibility; namely, the challenges we face with our current governance structure. Below we discuss updates since the site visit and highlight aspects of the report that require urgent attention: 1) additional faculty and staff hires, 2) improvements to program governance, 3) new permanent funding necessary for accomplishing the first two goals.

Updates since the Site Visit:

Since the site visit, PoE has hired for the new position of Academic Program Specialist, on the assumption that new permanent funding would be provided for this essential position. This support position is responsible for program communications, student engagement, and time schedule management. This new hire removes pressure from the single PoE adviser as the Environmental Studies major continues to grow. Additionally, The UW has approved a shift in the Environmental Studies major admission type from “open” to “minimum requirements”. This change was designed to stabilize enrollments in the major. Starting in Autumn 2024, students will be required to complete two ENVIR prefix courses and do some reflection and course mapping before declaring the major. This change will allow the small PoE faculty to effectively facilitate learning for Environmental Studies majors while continuing to offer large environmental literacy courses. Finally, the Dean of the College of the Environment (CoEnv) verbally approved a search for two Assistant Teaching Professors and indicated that a third should be hired if three stellar candidates are identified. These three changes are important steps which help stabilize PoE program size and excellence.

Enrollment and Staffing Needs:

Over the past decade, PoE has become a thriving undergraduate major, with student credit hours (SCH) growing by 135%, along with a 127% concurrent increase in majors since 2014¹. This success has been achieved primarily through the efforts of five core faculty who have designed the current curriculum, taught nearly all of our core courses and many elective courses, and directly hired, trained, and supervised the graduate instructors who do most of the remaining direct instruction. Remarkably, PoE faculty comprise less than 3% of the total faculty² in the CoEnv, yet PoE generates 15% of SCH and graduates 18-28% percent of students in the College³.

The review accurately reflects the outstanding work PoE faculty are doing to facilitate student environmental literacy across campus while mentoring students through our intensive, multidisciplinary major, which includes a required (and rare across campus) three quarter long capstone sequence. The review rates Environmental Studies as a “very high-quality degree program” that serves a “critical need at the University.” It acknowledges our excellence in teaching, while providing immersive and community-engaged learning opportunities, professional training through coursework and internships, and our wide variety of multidisciplinary course offerings. Additionally, the review ranks us favorably among world-class Environmental Studies programs in other large, public research universities.

In light of the tremendous growth PoE has experienced over the past decade, the review highlights an urgent need to increase funding for faculty and staff positions to maintain “strong pedagogical culture” and continue to deliver our “very high-quality degree program.” To this end, the report strongly suggests stabilizing current part-time faculty positions and improving faculty-student and advisor-student ratios, suggestions with which we wholeheartedly concur. We would like to highlight ethical, governance, and collegiality reasons for which faculty stabilization needs to occur. The review correctly notes that three long-term part-time faculty have been hired into Assistant or Associate Teaching Professor roles since 2019 while two long-term faculty members remain in part-time lecturer positions. This inequitable situation threatens to undermine our “strong team ethos and horizontal decision-making structure”. Eliminating long-term part-time lecturer positions and replacing these positions with Teaching Professor positions is a crucial step from an ethical and equity standpoint, as it ensures that all PoE faculty have rights commensurate with their responsibilities. It is a grave injustice to continue to run a world-class environmental studies program dependent on the labor of underpaid faculty with no opportunity for promotion. It is also a sound financial decision, necessary to maintain program quality and enrollment.

The PoE faculty agree with the committee that PoE has a “significant opportunity to expand in subject matter” especially with strengthening in the arts, humanities, and social sciences and that “new faculty that represent a broader range of disciplines should be recruited.” It is paramount that additional faculty hires be made in the social sciences and humanities to ensure that needed courses can be taught. PoE agrees with the committee recommendation for additional “creative discussions around faculty appointments”; for example, PoE and the CoEnv should discuss shared teaching responsibilities of tenure-line faculty appointed in other CoEnv departments as well as other Colleges. PoE faculty are enthusiastic about “expansion of connections with other academic units and faculty across the

¹ From Appendix D.2 Enrollment/Graduation Figures and Trends PoE Self Study

² From <https://environment.uw.edu/faculty/> (185 College of the Environment Faculty Profiles)

³ From Appendix D.2 Enrollment/Graduation Figures and Trends PoE Self Study.

University that share interests in Environmental Studies.” PoE faculty excel at this bridge-building work which enriches multidisciplinary environmental teaching and scholarship across our University. An additional faculty hire would also provide the benefit of providing PoE faculty more time for this vital bridge-building work.

Recommendations: In consensus with the Committee’s recommendations, we advocate strongly for the immediate posting of one student advisor position and three Assistant Teaching Professor positions. We cannot effectively serve our 521 majors⁴ with one advisor and five core faculty (three Assistant or Associate Teaching Professors and two Part-Time Lecturers), especially given the complexities of our interdisciplinary course of study. As is stated again and again in the review, PoE is over capacity and “additional teaching, mentoring, and advising capacity is needed.” As recommended by the review, PoE and the CoEnv should discuss continued, creative approaches towards faculty appointments. As noted above, we are delighted to have the verbal support of Dean Maya Tolstoy for these proposed faculty hires and an advisor hire.

Program Governance:

While the Committee correctly recognizes enrollment and staffing needs as a priority, a second major concern of the PoE faculty is the governance structure of PoE. The challenges presented by our governance structure include: 1) lack of PoE faculty voice in unit level, College level, and University level decision making, and 2) faculty appointment protocol. We will address these in the following paragraphs and propose solutions. At this time, neither the Committee nor the PoE faculty are in a position to make firm recommendations as to the ideal governance structure for our program.

PoE Faculty Voice and Decision Making: There is no voting body within PoE. As discussed further below, PoE faculty cannot vote to approve new hires or on promotions of other PoE faculty. PoE has limited representation in College decision-making. Although the PoE director sits on the College Executive Committee, PoE has no representation on the College Council. Additionally, PoE has no representation on the Faculty Senate. Although PoE Faculty as individuals are represented by Faculty Senators and College Council Members from the units in which they are appointed, PoE itself has limited representation in CoEnv decision making and no representation in University decision making. This lack of opportunity to contribute to shared governance is extremely problematic.

Hence, PoE faculty are not part of governance either within PoE nor at the College. While the PoE faculty enjoy a collegial working relationship with one another and horizontal decision-making structure on most decisions, major decisions occur by the dictate of director and faculty advisory council in a top-down manner. While this may have made sense in an era in which faculty would teach for PoE on a short-term basis, the five core PoE faculty (two of whom remain part time lecturers working essentially fulltime - despite their robust records) have taught in PoE for between eight and fifteen years. These faculty have developed the curriculum, hire/train/supervise graduate instructors, mentor the students, and are invested in long-term visioning for the program. Furthermore, because the PoE director

⁴ December 15, 2023. Undergraduates Eligible to Register report from Power BI Portal

appointment is 3-5 years and the director has never been one of the core faculty, the vision and goals of PoE have often changed significantly with director transitions.

Faculty Appointments: As a program, PoE is not a faculty appointing unit. As such, each faculty member in PoE is appointed in a “friendly unit” within the College of the Environment although 100% of their teaching is in PoE. This creates an administrative burden on both PoE and the appointing unit as multiple directors and administrators need to be involved with posting of any faculty position (including part-time lecturers) and promotion materials need to be collected by PoE staff to meet the needs of committees in other units. Although many units have some faculty with joint appointments, there is an added burden to PoE when every faculty member has, effectively, a joint appointment. Each faculty member in PoE has service responsibilities in two units. Additionally, decisions regarding appointment and promotion of faculty who work effectively 100% time in PoE, are made by faculty in the appointing unit, not in PoE. PoE faculty do not have the right to contribute to voting decisions about new faculty hires or promotions for faculty in PoE.

Additionally, this structure makes it impossible to appoint affiliate faculty. The committee report highlights that a “crucial difference” between PoE and Environmental Studies programs at peer institutions is that PoE has far fewer core and affiliated faculty. Official affiliation with PoE would be valued by faculty across campus and would lead to richer teaching, scholarly, and mentoring collaborations.

Recommendations: It is clear that PoE needs to move to a shared governance system in which PoE faculty have a stronger official voice in College affairs and a voice in their own program affairs, including faculty appointments and promotions. Departmentalization would be the clear way to achieve this. The committee highlights that departmentalization as a solution comes with challenges and potential flaws—such as, respectively, the difficulty of obtaining faculty lines for tenure track faculty, and the possibility of unintended consequences such as diminishing the power and rights of teaching faculty relative to tenure track faculty, but we do not see these as insurmountable. Overall, PoE faculty are enthusiastic about the expansion of disciplinary expertise, the opportunity to increase scholarly output, and the “expansion of connections with other academic units and faculty across the University [and world] that share interests in Environmental Studies” that would come with departmentalization. **PoE faculty and the CoEnv should commit to deciding whether PoE remains a program, departmentalizes, or seeks another solution to governance structure, during the calendar year of 2024.**

In the short term, PoE and the CoEnv should resume discussions about whether 1) “standing committees” as used in the College of Arts and Sciences could improve PoE internal Governance, or 2) A seat for a PoE faculty member should be added to the College Council.

Looking Forward

PoE faculty were surprised by the recommendation to consider a B.S. in Environmental Studies. Although other universities do have such programs, those universities do not have the world class School of Environment and Forest Sciences (SEFS) offering an excellent B.S. in Environmental Sciences. We do not believe that the Program on the Environment (or any future Environmental

Studies Department) should offer a B.S. in Environmental Studies – nor would we recommend that SEFS offer a B.A. degree in Environmental Science. Either of these additional curricular offerings by the College of the Environment would add complexity and confusion to undergraduate decision-making about their intended major, may reduce collegiality across our college, and would do so with no clear benefit.

We wish to touch on the Committee findings on DEI and place-based teaching. As noted in the review, place-based teaching and learning is already a strength of the PoE—and somewhat unique in focus spanning urban to rural communities. PoE faculty agree that the Environmental Studies major could be even more relevant if it were more deeply embedded within Seattle communities, giving students more opportunity for community engaged learning in a diverse and vibrant urban context. To this end, the PoE faculty are enthusiastic about contributing to curriculum development and teaching in the new Sustainability and Environmental Justice minor, where strengthening engagement with Seattle communities would be welcome and critical. PoE Faculty have also been providing leadership to help design a multidisciplinary Urban Agriculture minor - which would build on already close working ties with Seattle’s robust community of Urban and Peri-Urban farmers.

Closing remarks

In closing, we wish to once again thank the Committee for their attention to detail and for helping us frame our thinking on the success we have had, and the challenges we face. We urgently request formal approval to move forward with three teaching line faculty positions and one advisor position, while opening a longer term conversation about revision of our governance structure. We ask for serious consideration of our request for a significant infusion of new, permanent funding to help PoE build upon our considerable achievements in the past several years.

Sincerely, PoE core faculty

Kristi Straus, Associate Teaching Professor

Tim Billo, Part-time Lecturer

Yen-Chu Weng, Part-time Lecturer

Eli Wheat, Assistant Teaching Professor

P. Sean McDonald, Associate Teaching Professor

PoE Director, Gary Handwerk

PoE Faculty Council Members: Clare Ryan, Maria Elena Garcia, P. Joshua Griffin,

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