

Proposed Academic Senate Resolution of Support: Environmental Studies Major

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1. Introduction

Environmental Studies as a subject has significant momentum at Westmont College. A large number of faculty members from across disciplines teach and/or conduct research in this area, including Art (Lisa DeBoer), Communication Studies (Elizabeth Gardner and Deborah Dunn), Biology (Amanda Sparkman, Jeff Schloss and Beth Horvath), Chemistry (Stephen Contakes), History (Marianne Robins), English (Paul Willis and Kya Mangrum), Kinesiology (Cynthia Toms), Philosophy (Edward Song), Physics (Benjamin Carlson), Political Science (Katherine Bryant), Religious Studies (Caryn Reeder and Sandy Richter) and Sociology (Blake Kent). The College offers an Environmental Studies minor that has attracted significant student interest, as well as two active clubs, Students for Sustainability and the Westmont Garden Club. Furthermore, with the recent approval of a half-million dollar grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation to serve as the host institution for a Christian higher education climate change initiative, the timing is right to consider the launching of an Environmental Studies major.

2. Compatibility of Environmental Studies with Westmont's mission

- a. Westmont seeks to cultivate “thoughtful scholars, grateful servants, and faithful leaders for global engagement with the academy, church, and world.” In other words, we seek to equip students to meet the deep and complex needs of the world through their vocations. Evidence of humanity’s drastic impact on the planet grows steadily, and as a result, many Christians are rediscovering the mandate to care for God’s creation. The world urgently needs Christians who, out of their biblical commitments, can help to lead society toward wiser and more sustainable practices, and an Environmental Studies major at Westmont could help to meet this need.
- b. Westmont enthusiastically embraces its liberal arts identity, and Environmental Studies is rooted in the sort of broad, interdisciplinary education that the liberal arts provides. The subject requires a foundation in the core liberal arts skills of critical and creative thinking, and an adequate understanding of the environment draws on a diverse array of subjects such as biology, chemistry, ecology, economics, history, political science, sociology, and theology. Narrow training is impossible in a field such as Environmental Studies.
- c. Environmental Studies is best taught through a Christian, residential, rigorous undergraduate community that is Westmont’s trademark. One cannot become educated in the field without personal mentoring from skilled professors and a rigorous academic atmosphere that a quality college such as Westmont provides, in which students engage with their instructors both inside and outside of the classroom.

3. Value of Environmental Studies to Westmont

- a. Environmental Studies represents a valuable opportunity to strengthen enrollment and tuition revenue as well. Environmental Studies is a high-demand major among college students today. As such, it is offered by nearly all of Westmont’s primary public and private competitors, including UCSB, UCLA, Biola, Calvin, Point Loma, Vanguard, and Wheaton. Moreover, in a fall 2021 survey of prospective students at Westmont, when asked, “Which of the following academic majors would you be interested in studying if Westmont offered them?” Environmental Studies ranked second, just behind Criminal Justice.
- b. Environmental Studies majors would be required to spend at least one semester off-campus at one of the many environmentally-focused study abroad programs with which Westmont already has partnerships. Thus, the major would provide an outlet for enrollment growth beyond the 1,200 student on-campus cap.

Conclusion

While sufficient funding would need to be identified and curricular details developed, the Academic Senate supports in principle an Environmental Studies major as consistent with Westmont’s mission and beneficial to the College.