

Middlebury College Environmental Studies Community-Engaged Practicum: *A Civic-Learning Experience*

<http://sites.middlebury.edu/envs0401/>

Engage-Integrate-Apply-Connect

Through this interdisciplinary capstone experience, our senior environmental studies majors collaborate with community organizations to lend their creativity, perspectives and research skills to addressing current environmental issues in our region and beyond.

Capstone Course Model

Middlebury College's Environmental Studies capstone is designed to have students integrate and apply a range of disciplinary perspectives to a community research challenge. This interdisciplinary thinking is enhanced through the core-focus-capstone structure of our major. The consideration of diverse perspectives is further promoted by 1) practicum partnerships with "guest experts" from the community who lead field trips, present their work and research, and mentor students during the semester and 2) faculty and staff representing varied expertise responding to students' oral and written project progress reports.

Research challenges are developed with our community partners in advance of the semester. Students typically work in teams of five, within a 15-20 person seminar. The seminar is dedicated to project-based work, yet also includes six sessions of student-led reading discussion of the relevant literature, three field trips and/or meetings with guest experts, reflective writing assignments, and a workshop on persuasive speaking. Project management consists of a minimum of three sessions with the community partner, written work plans and progress reports, weekly oral progress reports for peer feedback, and the mid-term oral progress report for faculty and staff noted above. The seminar culminates with oral and written presentations. The themes for the seminar are determined through a combination of known community needs and the areas of interest and expertise of the faculty leading the seminar any given semester.

High Impact Practices

This course combines three "[High Impact Educational Practices](#)" as defined by George D. Kuh (AAC&U, 2008). These include:

Collaborative Assignments and Projects

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

In these programs, field-based “experiential learning” with community partners is an instructional strategy – and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

Capstone Courses and Projects

Whether they’re called “senior capstones” or some other name, these culminating experiences require students nearing the end of their college years to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they’ve learned. The project might be a research paper, a performance, a portfolio of “best work,” or an exhibit of artwork. Capstones are offered both in departmental programs and, increasingly, in general education as well.

Products

Desired project outcomes and final products are determined in collaboration with our community partners. In the past, final deliverables have taken a range of forms, from formal reports, policy briefs, draft legislation, spatial analyses, web sites, podcasts, digital stories, etc.

For more details on example project statements see:

<http://sites.middlebury.edu/envs0401/project-archive/project-statement-archive/>

For example final products see:

<http://sites.middlebury.edu/envs0401/project-archive/>

Partner Feedback

The students did an amazing job with their research and assembling a very complex series of related items to the topic. Very, very well done. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you and the students on this useful project!

The report exceeded my expectations. The students found multiple solutions and their recommendations should provide ideas for policy makers and State Agencies to move the industry forward.

The students provided insight into landscape characteristics of water quality in this region. This collaboration is a way to utilize student’s skills and generate community involvement between groups that might not otherwise interact.

The students took an expansive view of the material and brought to light some recommendations that are a little outside of the box, which can be a challenge when working on a project as a practitioner. Because the students come at the topic without bias based on past experience, they illuminated possibilities that may have been dismissed prematurely by those of us who work on this subject every day.