

# Service Learning and the Environment: Reading and Writing About the Environment

First-Year English Theme Section Project, 2001-2002  
Department of English  
University of South Carolina, Columbia  
funded by Mini-Grant from Sustainable Universities Initiative

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*"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I will learn."*

-Benjamin Franklin

In Service Learning courses, real life comes tumbling into the classroom as students' service experience provides the content for purposeful dialogue leading to real understanding of academic concepts.... Service Learning education is a process of living, not a preparation for life.... Service Learning provides students with real-life, meaningful experiences which by their very nature force critical thinking. In service, students encounter events that may conflict with their assumptions. They deal with issues or incidents that challenge familiar competencies and/or understandings. These experiences create perplexity or dissonance, which is often the beginning of learning.

-"Roots of Service Learning," Quinnipiac University

Through the funding provided by the Sustainable Universities Initiative, this grant extended and expanded our 2001-2002 program, which incorporated sustainability issues into selected sections of English 101, the largest course on the University of South Carolina's Columbia campus. This year's program involved **9 graduate student instructors, 18 sections of English 101 and 102**, and approximately **560 first-year students**, who worked for approximately 30 campus and community agencies. **The students performed an approximate total of 5600 hours of community service** for these agencies.

## The Grant Funded Project Overview

During the 2002-2003 academic year, nine TAs taught nineteen special sections of English 101 and 102 focused on reading and writing about the environment. The senior graduate students, selected because of their interest in the project and their strong teaching records, developed and taught the 101 and 102 sections as part of a special "curriculum development group." Each section focused on a different topic related to environmental sustainability, around which reading and writing assignments were organized. Additionally, each section incorporated a ten-hour community-service component related to the environment.

### **The Project served SUI's goals by**

- **Promoting environmental literacy** among the graduate student instructors who participated in the project and the first-year students who took the courses;
- **Building positive connections** between our program and the larger community by creating opportunities for instructors and students to work on behalf of local non-profit agencies concerned with the environment;
- **Promoting interdisciplinary study** of the environment by incorporating readings from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities into the courses;
- **Developing an instructor pool** prepared to teach courses focused on environmental issues, since participating instructors can then offer the courses they have developed in future semesters in our program and after graduation when they take jobs at other institutions.

### **Detailed Overview of the 2002-2003 Grant**

#### **Development and Planning**

Instructors designed and developed the nineteen environmental theme sections during Summer 2002, working collaboratively with each other and under the supervision of Dr. Christy Friend, the Associate Director of First-Year English. The grant enabled the First-Year English program to develop the Curriculum Design Team. The purpose of the Team was to develop innovative themed English Composition courses. The theme chosen for 2002-2003 was "Reading and Writing about the Environment."

The team challenged each instructor to develop a course that incorporated at least one unit and corresponding major paper assignment revolving around the issues of sustainability and the environment. Additionally, the students in the course had to perform at least 10 hours of service learning at a selected group of agencies. The service-learning had to involve the environment and/or issues of sustainability. One of the nine instructors received an additional stipend to work with instructors to develop a list of appropriate service agencies and to build relationships to those agencies. The Office of Community Service at USC worked with the team to address liability and informed consent issues.

The instructors met over the summer to plan their courses, review composition and environmental textbooks, discuss issues and ideas of sustainability and decide how the requirements of the grant could be incorporated into the classroom. During freshman enrollment, an informational flyer was distributed to academic advisors and department heads who could inform registering first-year students about the themed sections. In addition, an informational Web page was created, at <http://www.cla.sc.edu/ENGL/WritingPrograms/FirstYrEnglish/Environment/index.html>

Once registration was completed, the instructors developed an informational packet and letter that was sent to students enrolled in the themed sections explaining how the section would differ from other English 101 and 102 courses. The prospective students were given an opportunity to withdraw from the courses should they object to the theme or the community service/service learning component. Every section experienced some turnover in enrollment, though there were only three cases that could be determined to have occurred directly as a result of the grant.

Furthermore, the Department of English continued to co-sponsor the Sustainable Universities Initiative's essay contest "Writing for Our Common Future" which encourages students enrolled in English 101 and English 102 (on all University of South Carolina campuses) to submit essays addressing issues of the environment and sustainability. This year, a description of the contest was included in the *Writing At Carolina* English 101 Handbook, leading to an even greater awareness by first-year students and their graduate instructors of SUI's mission.

### **Impact**

Number of Sections	18
Number of Participating Instructors	9
Number of Participating Students	560
Number of Community Service Hours Served	5600

### **Partial List of Agencies Served**

- Sesquicentennial State Park
- SC Heritage Trust
- Congaree Swamp National Monument
- Habitat for Humanity
- Harbison State Forest
- Harvest Hope Food Bank
- SC Wildlife Magazine
- Oliver Gospel Mission
- Salvation Army
- Sierra Club
- SUI On-Campus projects

### **Survey Instrument**

Again this year, a questionnaire was administered to gauge student reactions to the pilot program and to gain a better understanding of the student response to the course and its theme. The evaluations are currently under review, but our preliminary analysis indicates that the majority of the students reacted positively to the course and indicated that the course increased their environmental awareness.

### **Program Recognition**

The project has been recognized with articles in *FYE*, the newsletter of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, and in *Aspects*, the English Department's Annual Newsletter, as well as the University of South Carolina's Faculty/Staff *Times*.

Three instructors were invited to present papers on the program at the Conference on College Composition and Communication held March 18-21, 2003 in New York City. The editor of a national service-learning journal who attended the session has contacted Dr. Friend to encourage that she and the group submit an article on the project. Project instructors won several teaching awards this year, including the Elliot Award for Outstanding Teaching in First-Year English, and the English Department Teaching Fellowship. Dr. Friend won a Mungo Award for Graduate Teaching based partly on her work with the project. Finally, all three instructors who were on the job market this year have secured permanent, full-time, tenure track faculty positions at other universities, where at least two will continue to teach environmental themed courses.

### **Post-Grant Projects**

As a result of the grant project, the Curriculum Design Team will present a panel at the 2003 Greening of the Campus V Conference at Bowling Green University in October. Additionally, the success of the program for both instructors and English 101/102 students has prompted a pursuit of a 2003-2004 SUI mini-grant to help in expanding the program and incorporating more instructors and more sections of English 101 and 102.

Data gathered from student evaluations and student papers is currently under review in order to help expand and develop further themed courses in English Composition.

### **Selected Bibliography for English 101/102 Writing About the Environment**

*The following texts were used in designing the syllabi of the instructors teaching under this grant program.*

Anderson, Lorraine, John P. O'Grady, and Scott Slovic, Eds. *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture*. New York: Longman, 1999.

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Dobrin, Sidney and Christian Weisler. *EcoComposition*. Albany: SUNY, 2002.

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Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *CCC* 45.3 (October 1994): 307-319.

Keegan, Bridget and James C. McKusick, Eds. *Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of Nature Writing*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001.

Ross, Carolyn, Ed. *Writing Nature: An Ecological Reader for Writers*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Verburg, Carol J., Ed. *The Environmental Predicament: Four Issues for Critical Analysis*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.