

MEMO

To: The UVM Faculty Senate
From: Curricular Affairs Committee of the Faculty Senate (Stephen Everse, Co-Chair)
Date: April 8, 2022
Re: A Proposal by RSENR to Rename the BS in Natural Resources to Sustainability, Ecology and Policy

The Curricular Affairs Committee discussed a proposal from the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources (RSENR) to rename their BS degree program in Natural Resources to Sustainability, Ecology and Policy at our April 7th meeting. Our discussion revolved around why “environment” was not used in the proposed name, why “Applied Ecology” as advocated by Biology was not used in the proposed name, the role of sustainability in the major when it isn’t highlighted in the tracks, and how Natural Resources does not truly describe the major (as highlighted in their recent APR). Ultimately the CAC voted to approve to change the program name to Sustainability, Ecology and Policy recognizing that it nearly impossible to identify a name that accurately describes a program that is agreeable to all. Additionally, some members were swayed that this name was agreeable to Deans Falls (CAS), Mathews (RSENR), and Parise (CALs). The vote was: 16 to accept, 1 opposed, and 2 abstentions.

Proposal

The faculty in the RSENR propose to rename the BS degree program in Natural Resources to Sustainability, Ecology and Policy. The two advising tracks in the major will also be revised:

- Option in Resource Ecology will be updated to Applied Ecology
- Option in Resource Planning will be updated to Environmental Planning, Policy and Law

The current Integrated advising option will be unchanged. This change will not result in any changes to course prefixes, curricular structure, major requirements, programmatic support, faculty alignments, or course offerings. RSENR faculty unanimously approved the name change at a faculty meeting held on January 11, 2022.

Rationale for Name Change

The BS program in Natural Resources was approved by the University Board of Trustees in 1990. It was constituted of existing courses offered in RSENR and the University, relevant to the study and understanding of ecological systems and processes. For the first 10 years of the program, students chose among advising tracks in Aquatic Resources, Terrestrial Ecology, and Integrated Natural Resources. In 2001, the options were revised because of new opportunities in RSENR and the University, student interests and faculty expertise. The advising tracks became:

- Aquatic Resources option was moved to the Environmental Sciences program
- Terrestrial Ecology option was updated to Resource Ecology
- The Integrated Natural Resources option continued but has evolved to provide a path for students integrating the social and ecological dimensions of natural resources and environment, bridging resource ecology and resource planning

- Resource Planning was developed and introduced to support the growing interest in the social dimensions of natural resources policy and planning

Natural Resources is an outdated term from the 1970's that is too general and does not convey to students what is encompassed in the program. The mismatch between the name of the program and the content of the coursework is misleading and confusing. Thus, students are unsure what a degree in Natural Resources is and prevents students from seeing it as a pathway for their undergraduate studies. As such, the major is primarily an internal discovery major. These were key concerns raised by outside reviewers during the APR process that concluded in the Spring of 2019.

The proposed name Sustainability, Ecology and Policy captures the overall mission and learning outcomes of the existing major, and reflects the multiple disciplinary dimensions of sustainability science. It also directly reflects the three tracks within the curriculum as follows:

1. Sustainability corresponds to the focus on the bridging of social and ecological dimensions in the study of natural resources and environment encompassed in the integrated option.
2. Ecology corresponds to the focus on ecological processes and systems encompassed by the resource ecology track, which will be updated to "applied ecology".
3. Policy corresponds to the focus on social processes and systems encompassed by the resource planning track, which will be updated to "environmental planning, policy and law".

Concerns Raised During Public Comment Period

Several faculty members and the entire Department of Biology raised concerns which are summarized below:

1. The name change seems more substantive than simply aligning the offering with the field. In particular, this proposal seems to run counter to the spirit of that agreement that resulted in redistributing/redefining Environmental Studies, Environmental Science and Agroecology into CAS, RSENR and CALS (rather than as programs that span multiple colleges) by setting up what is in essence a competitor to Environmental Studies (which studies the environment through science, humanities, and social science) but in RSENR.
2. Allowing NR to shift into an ENVs-like major means that crucial ENVs faculty now in RSENR (Amy Seidl, Trish O'Kane, Brendan Fisher, Jon Erickson, Rachelle Gould, etc) may need to teach courses for a growing Sustainability, Ecology and Policy major which will diminish and stymie the efforts by ENVs to create a strong and sustainable major in CAS.
3. The advising paths (Resource Planning and Integrated Natural Resources) are heavily dependent upon courses outside of RSENR. There is still a 'core' curriculum and Gen Ed credits to be achieved, but even though they are listed here as 'distribution' requirements, the actual subject specialization in these areas is entirely dependent upon courses in mostly CAS which leaves students in these paths totally dependent upon courses outside of the programs control.
4. Sustainability, Ecology and Policy is equally as broad as Natural Resources with no clear indication of the specific content being taught – specifically the use of sustainability and ecology, which is a traditional field of biology. Incoming students will continue to be confused about which, among many majors, best reflects their interests, at a time when the University is making a concerted effort to better differentiate and streamline programs to alleviate this exact problem. Please consider renaming the program "Ecological Sustainability and Policy" which would indicate a focus on sustainability issues in ecological systems as the course work implies.

Proposers Responses

Responses summarized to each of the points described above:

1. The name change for the Natural Resources program is not a response to the redistribution of the ENVs, ENSC, and Agroecology majors, rather it is in response to our APR where our reviewers

indicated the Natural Resources was outdated and created confusion in students' minds as to what they would learn. Most importantly, this is a name change to an existing program, not the development of a new program that would compete with ENVS in CAS.

2. The name change to the existing Natural Resources program involves no new classes or changes to teaching assignments in any courses. We also note that the MOUs related to Environmental Studies and Environmental Sciences clarify that teaching will continue by all units to support Environmental Studies. The RSENR has demonstrated that they are contributing more to ENVS course instruction than the MOU requires for AY 2022, as evidenced in the current Fall 2022 Schedule of Courses build.
3. The advising tracks in the existing NR major are not being altered as a part of this name change, nor are there any changes to the established curricular structure, which allows students to select from among relevant courses in the RSENR and other units on campus. This structure has been in existence since the outset of the program in 1990, and is common in other RSENR majors (e.g. ENSC) based on our interdisciplinary approach to environmental disciplines and recognition that relevant expertise exists beyond our unit.
4. Sustainability science is a recognized field of research "... dealing with the interactions between natural and social systems with a focus on how these interactions affect the challenge of sustainability: meeting the needs of present and future generations while substantially reducing poverty and conserving the planet's life support systems" (NAS website). In academic settings, it encompasses the intersection of social and natural sciences applied to developing lasting solutions pressing social and environmental issues. It is true that "sustainability" is a general education category at the University of Vermont, ensuring that all UVM students will have a basic understanding of 'sustainability' concepts irrespective of their major. These general education requirements do not mean a student cannot go further in their study of mathematics, global studies, or sustainability, as this major does. As such, the use of the term Sustainability along with the terms Ecology and Policy, is an appropriate, intentional and meaningful reference to this field. The use of the term Ecology in the new name, accurately describes the content of the program and the preparation of graduates for Ecologist Certification through the Ecological Society of America. The alternative name is rejected because the use of the adjective 'ecological' to modify 'sustainability' would signal that the degree's treatment of sustainability is limited only to ecological domains, as compared to a fuller consideration of the multi- and inter-disciplinary dimensions of sustainability.

Letters Provided in Support

Letters from Dean Parise (CALS) and Dean Falls (CAS) support the proposed name change.

Summary

RSENR proposes to rename the BS degree program in Natural Resources to Sustainability, Ecology and Policy in response to their recent APR. The request has been supported by the Deans of CALS and CAS and the Vice Provost. Four public comments were received and the proposers' provided responses to the concerns raised. There are no associated curricular changes being proposed with this name change.