

Curricular Affairs Committee of the Faculty Senate

MEMO

To: The UVM Faculty Senate
From: Curricular Affairs Committee of the Faculty Senate, Colby Kervick and Stephen Everse, Co-Chairs
Date: December 7, 2023
Re: Approval of a Proposal from College of Agriculture and Life Sciences for name change for the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences to Agriculture, Landscape and Environment Department as well as a request for a new course prefix (ALE).

On December 7, 2023 the Curricular Affairs Committee approved the actions recommended in the following memo.

On December 7, 2023, the CAC unanimously approved a proposal from the College of Agriculture and Life Science to change the name of the Plant and Soil Sciences Department to the Agriculture, Landscape, and Environment (ALE) Department. The CAC also approved a companion request to establish a new course prefix “ALE” for all courses currently listed as “PSS”.

In facilitating the development of this proposal acting chair David Barrington led the department faculty through three phases of development: a deep review and synthesis of faculty teaching, research, and outreach interests and activities; a distillation of these interests into a new department name that captures the faculty's collective preference for a representative name; and a process of identifying the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats attending the proposal process for the name change.

The faculty unanimously approved the selection of Agriculture, Landscape and Environment (ALE) in the spring of 2023. It was subsequently approved by the CALS curriculum committee on September 18, 2023, and the CALS faculty on October 23, 2023. According to the proposers, a key strength of the new name is its clarity in representing the current teaching and research activities in the department with language that is understood by potential students and stakeholders across Vermont, nationally, and internationally. The new department name and course prefix reflects the ways the program links agriculture, landscape, and the environment. In their proposal they noted, “A College that pays so much attention to teaching, research, and outreach about the environment deserves to have the word in visible places; our department name is such a place.” One of the support letters from Dean Falls from the College of Arts and Sciences echoed this sentiment stating: “In supporting the name change, I wish to express how pleased I am that we have moved beyond the notion that any one college, department, program, major, or minor “owns” the “environment” label. The University and its faculty and students are better served not only when programs are accurately labeled, but also when our extraordinary depth of scholarship and teaching in areas like the environment and health are recognized across the University.”

The proposers elaborated that the existing department name, Plant and Soil Sciences doesn't fully capture the focus of the current curriculum, research, and outreach endeavors. It is also often confused with Plant Biology. They also explicitly noted the distinction between agriculture and agroecology explaining, "Agroecology is a holistic approach to agriculture and food systems—one of our important specialties. However, our department does more in the realm of agriculture, including horticulture, integrated pest management, and crop genetics".

When choosing "Landscape" in the new name, the proposers made a point that within the context of agriculture, work with landscapes is central to many decisions that are made on land use and environmental sustainability. They also signaled that use of this term will support inaugurations of an accelerated Master's Program in Ecological Landscape Design and ultimately an accredited Master's in Landscape Architecture program. Lastly the proposers explained that putting "Environment" in the department name fits with a strategy to environmental themes within work around sustaining landscapes, supporting pollinators in agricultural planning, integrated pest management, intercropping with solar panels, enhancing crop genetic diversity through protecting wild relatives, and enhancing the quality of life of farmers.

The proposers confirmed with the registrar that ALE is available both as a Department name and Course Prefix and included a listing of the current PSS course list, which will transition to the new ALE prefix. They received letters of support from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the co-directors of Environmental Studies, Interim Dean of Rubenstein School for the Environment and Natural Resources, the Acting Chair of Civil and Environmental Engineering, the Dean of the Graduate College, the chair of the Department of Geography and Geosciences, and the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. No public comment was received during the circulation period. It is important to note that in one letter of support, the Chair of the Civil and Environmental Engineering program did mention the importance of continuing to think about ways to help prospective UVM students become knowledgeable about the array of environmentally focused programs offered across the university.

In summary, changing Plant and Soil Sciences Department to the Agriculture, Landscape and Environment Department (ALE) will broaden the kinds of students choosing to enroll in the major, support faculty recruitment and better reflect the curriculum outreach and research endeavors of the department. It may also be more favorable in the process of seeking grant funding in competitions that have agriculture and environmental alignment. It will also reduce existing confusion with the Plant Biology department. Moreover, the new name and course prefix more fully represents the mission of the program and expertise of their faculty. The CAC reviewed the proposal and the supporting documents and has approved the new course prefix and recommend the Faculty Senate approve the Department name change request.