

## **ENST PPR REVIEWER REPORT**

Society increasingly faces a range of environmental pressures. The market for environmentally-aligned careers has been on an upward trajectory for the past two decades. As such, there is a need to train an environmentally literate workforce to occupy the new and existing employment opportunities designed to address these challenges. CSUF is well-placed to provide a graduate-level education to train students for these positions.

Nationwide, interdisciplinarity is both the strength of environmental studies programs and its challenge. In general, environmental studies students and faculty value the ability to bring together diverse disciplines in ways that address the topics and issues they are most interested in. As a university program, this is challenging to curate well, requiring nimbleness and adaptation. Our review found the ENST MS program to sit well within this disciplinary quandary by maintaining and communicating program strengths of flexibility and interdisciplinarity while also providing cohesion. We expect a continued and more strategic investment in the ENST MS program will create more robust enrollment as more students seek relevant and practical environmental training.

### **Review process**

Review team:

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This report is based on the review team's study of the Environmental Studies (ENST) Masters Program Performance Review self-report and faculty CVs, followed by a site visit on February 6th, 2024. During the on-campus visit, the review team met with:

- Dr. Jessica Stern, Interim Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences,
- Dr. Carl Wendth, Interim Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences,
- ENST MS program leaders: Elaine Lewinnek and Nicole Seymore,
- ENST MS program faculty: Drs. David Adams, April Bullock, Sara Fingal, Phil Gedalanga, Sarah Grant, Martin McCarthy (adjunct), and Craig McConnell,
- CSUF Facilities Sustainability leader: Stephanie del Rosario,
- ENST MS department office staff member: Kim Bette, and
- ENST MS current students and recent alum

The following report is divided into sections that address program strengths, challenges, and recommendations for students, curriculum, faculty, and program leadership and administration. Because the ENST MS Program's Self Study so effectively documents the program's many noteworthy accomplishments, we have focused our report primarily on areas for growth and suggestions for how that growth might be achieved.

## Students and Student Recruitment

### *Strengths*

The ENST MS program has enthusiastic students from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and life stages. The program cultivates a strong sense of community between faculty and students and among students within the program, particularly within a cohort. The topics for student projects are diverse and reflect various interests among faculty, students, and important contemporary environmental issues.

### *Challenges and Recommendations*

A central challenge of many university programs is how to retain and recruit more students. We recommend two areas that could provide opportunities to maintain program flexibility while also expanding exposure to CSUF undergraduates to create a more consistent pipeline into the ENST MS program.

#### *More Strategic Alignment with other Colleges at CSUF -- Generating BA to MS pipelines*

Students we interviewed unanimously applauded the program's flexibility. However, some students also asked for more structure or curricular direction. We recommend working with a few core departments outside the College of HSS to strengthen the program's curriculum and provide more easily identifiable linkages to other allied departments. In particular,

- Building stronger relationships and involvement with the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics (NSM), including recruiting more faculty or more regular involvement of these faculty. Two students/alumni we spoke with moved from biology to the MS degree program. The program's flexibility and professional applications were part of what motivated these transfers. More strategic outreach and involvement of this college would potentially lead to more students who are drawn to the sciences but also learn that they are more interested in the application of science through other allied fields than in pursuing science as their primary discipline. This is a relationship-building strategy between the two colleges, but it can also be a marketing strategy for the identity of the ENST MS Program overall.
- Similarly, building stronger relationships and clarifying roles with the Geography undergraduate program could potentially increase structure, clarity, and a pipeline from BA to MS. Currently, the relationship between GEOG and ENST seems unclear. Yet, this seems a promising area for collaboration. We recommend that leadership and faculty consider merging the two MS programs, especially if the Geography program retention is threatened under recent CSU-wide mandates. There may also be the potential for connections between the ENST MS program and Geology.
- We recommend the ENST MS program look for opportunities in existing undergraduate curricula that ENST could connect with, such as in the Food Studies minor. While we do not recommend that the ENST MA program build their own minor, the program could more strategically identify areas within the existing undergraduate curriculum as a tool for recruitment. The program could also explore offering one 400/500 level course within aligned minors, such as the Food Studies minor, which relates to our recommendation below.

#### *Strategic 400/500 Course Offerings*

- Currently, faculty are enrolling ENST MS students on an ad hoc basis for upper level undergraduate courses that align with ENST student interests. We recommend compiling a core list of 400-level courses (esp. in key feeder disciplines) that could be cross-listed as

400/500-level courses. This would potentially broaden course offerings for the ENST program, and it could also serve as a means to expose more undergraduates from CSU Fullerton to the ENST MS students and, therefore, the program. This would be one means of creating increased structure and direction for students while at the same time maintaining the existing strengths of interdisciplinarity and flexibility.

- More intentional 400/500 course offerings could also reduce the workload of those faculty who are currently revising their courses on a case-by-case basis.

#### *Other Recruitment and Retention Suggestions*

- While cohorting is a strength of the program, students liked it so much that they suggested changing the program structure so that cohorts enroll in one core class per semester, allowing the cohort to remain together for a longer duration of their academic trajectory. This may not be possible with faculty schedules and/or might reduce the ability to cohort during the first year if fewer courses are taken together. We suggest considering if there are other ways to build cohorts across the second year, potentially through a seminar series or other offering.
- Consider offering one or more ENST MS courses online to accommodate student preferences and perhaps make the program more alluring to students who do not live locally or have work or family commitments.
- Consider running an ENST summer study away course to Zzyzx as a work-around to Extended Ed's enrollment minimum.
- We recommend recruiting beyond SoCal through outreach to Central Coast and Northern CA schools with ENST and related BA programs as well as nationwide. Outreach to sister CSU campuses with BA and BS programs in environmental studies and environmental sciences could be particularly fruitful in establishing potential pipelines to the program.
- Advertise to environmental nonprofits across the US, particularly to those where alumni may have been successfully employed.
- Currently, there appears to be good alumni engagement. This engagement could be expanded and more formalized, such as through the recent creation of a LinkedIn group, but also through other means. We recommend engagement through course or co-curricular panel discussions, lectures, or other means of putting alumni in touch with students to expand the alumni network and support professional development of existing students.

## Interdisciplinarity, Curricular and Co-Curricular Offerings

### *Strengths*

The ENST MS program provides a strong interdisciplinary program with three core classes, excellent partnerships across campus and within the community, and a range of co-curricular and professional opportunities that generate well-rounded graduates from the program. Students praise the flexibility and interdisciplinarity of the program and curricular offerings. Committed adjuncts keep professional applications of course offerings current, emphasizing environmental assessment, education, habitat restoration, law, and planning. The system of rotating through "topics" courses is a strength because it allows adjuncts to bring their expertise on an intermittent and thus more sustainable basis for working professionals. It also exposes students to a range of contemporary environmental topics of importance. These job market sectors have strong upward projections for employment and often intersect with important environmental justice issues in the southern California region.

The curriculum draws on important high-impact practices, including opportunities for field trips, research, and capstones. Field offerings are extensive and well integrated, including with the U-Acre

farm, apiary, and arboretum; the CSU Desert Studies Center in Zzyzx, Bolsa Chica Reserve, and Back Bay Science Center; as well as internships and opportunities for environmental activism and urban ecology. Research projects with diverse faculty address a range of topics and disciplinary approaches to environmental issues.

### *Challenges and Recommendations*

Students love the interdisciplinarity and flexibility of the curriculum, but it can be a double-edged sword because there are so many options that it can feel unstructured. Flexibility can be a challenge as students feel the program sometimes lacks coherence. Students also identified a potential gap in access to natural sciences within the core curriculum (both that the courses they currently take do not contain enough natural science, or that the students have been unable to get into natural science courses of interest). Our meetings were almost exclusively with HSS faculty. This could be a function of the day or our review meetings, but the self-study also identifies the majority of affiliated faculty as having expertise in the social sciences or environmental humanities. As a result, we recommend:

#### *Consider Identifying Curricular Themes or Pathways*

- We recommend implementing additional structure that can provide coherence and organization to the ENST MS program, such as identifying curricular pathways or curricular themes and creating advising sheets or other clear documents that can be posted on the website. This would enable students to identify for themselves a stronger direction to their degree while maintaining program flexibility. Themes could align with the courses currently taught by adjuncts (i.e., environmental assessment, environmental education, environmental law, and environmental planning) or could be based on successful student trajectories for some of the most common professions. This exercise could also be helpful for leadership and faculty to identify potential curricular gaps that would support the goal of expanding the breadth of course offerings while at the same time potentially allowing increased program rigor in thematic areas. We emphasize the need for *strategically* increasing the breadth of existing course offerings.

#### *Consider Options for Increasing Natural Science Focus*

Some students described that discussion-based classes can feel less rigorous, and these students would appreciate more scientific rigor in some courses, perhaps via case studies. This reflects an inherent tension and need for balance between the critical studies and social sciences, which emphasize humanistic, phenomenological, and inequities, with the natural sciences, which tend to emphasize positivistic and systems approaches to environmental problems aligned with traditional conservation practices.

- To address student concerns about the lack of scientific rigor in some ENST MS classes, the program could also look at the faculty engaged with these classes and bring in a natural or environmental scientist to teach one of the core classes.
- Students also identified GIS as a potential gap. Given the centrality of GIS to nearly every aspect of environmental professions, consider more direct advising or adding a GIS-focused environmental problems course to the core offerings.
- A number of student research projects are aligned with natural and physical sciences, which emphasizes the need to consider ways to better integrate NSM and potentially other colleges into the coordination of the program overall.

#### *Consider Options for Increasing or Integrating Additional Professional Applications*

- Students would welcome more exposure to professional applications of ENST through more structured and frequent events—such as alumni panels or a speaker series—earlier and more

regularly throughout the program. This could also be accomplished through an “Environmental Professions” course added to the ENST curriculum. MS students could run this themselves, and this function could be integrated into one of their core courses. This is a model currently employed by CSU Monterey Bay’s program (CSUMB), in which MS students take on the coordination, outreach, and participation in a professional and research speaker series focused on topics of interest in the region.

## Faculty

### *Strengths*

A strength of the ENST MS program is the energetic and committed faculty members who enthusiastically spoke about working with ENST students and supporting the ENST MS program more broadly. They spoke favorably about the current ENST leadership. The affiliated faculty articulated that it provides a place for faculty from diverse disciplines to do teaching and research within the environment fields, which they might not be able to do in their home department. For example, some faculty expressed that mentoring ENST students on their capstone projects is especially valuable to them because it is the only time they can work in environmental areas.

### *Challenges and Recommendations*

Since affiliated faculty all have home departments outside of the ENST MS program, a challenge is that the home departments sometimes do not recognize labor done by faculty to support the ENST MS program. Affiliated faculty articulated that they are not well-remunerated for advising ENST MS students and that their home departments sometimes do not count faculty work in the ENST MS program and with ENST MS students. Some faculty went so far as to say that their home department resented the time and labor spent with the ENST MS program, as it takes away from their contributions to their home department. One faculty was recommended by their home department to limit their contributions to the ENST MS program, and more than one to limit their contributions until after they are fully tenured. We recommend that the ENST program leadership stay in touch with the HSS Dean’s office to discuss pathways for different departments that contribute to the program, particularly those from different Colleges, to be rewarded for their work with the ENST MS program (see recommendations to the HSS Dean’s office below).

### *Promote community amongst the ENST faculty*

- Continue recruiting more regularly across all colleges, including among new faculty, to expand further and diversify the affiliated faculty.
- Emphasize connections among the faculty, potentially by aligning affiliated faculty with thematic focus areas.
- Consider offering a lecture series where ENST scholars visit campus and/or ENST faculty share their research. This would be helpful for MS students by introducing the students to the varied research being done by the diverse faculty, which might lead to connections for capstone projects or thesis research, and by providing connections for the students to work done by practitioners. (See curricular recommendations above.)
- Since ENST faculty members come from different departments and even different Colleges, they don’t have many opportunities to connect with one another. The ENST program could hold events for affiliated faculty (with or without students) such as a lecture or colloquia series (as indicated above), or social events at the start or the end of year/semester.

## Program Administration

### *Strengths*

The ENST MS program is supported by strong program leaders committed to the program and its students. These leaders go above and beyond in their labor to the program than the teaching release provided for this work. They have worked to institutionalize many of the processes in the program and to be welcoming and inclusive of its faculty. Student feedback indicated that the faculty advisers are helpful, responsive, and very accessible.

### *Challenges and Recommendations*

A core challenge is that the ENST MS program would benefit from additional work, particularly in conveying information to current and potential future students. Yet, the two faculty members are already working beyond expectations for the position, and this communication work does not need to be done by faculty. The self-study identifies that the coordinator and grad advisor are regularly in danger of violating union rules for the maximum permitted 18.75 WTUs per semester. In learning more from each of them about their roles and responsibilities in our site visit, we agree and emphasize a concern for the program's sustainability as currently designed. There is not only a potential for burnout among program leaders due to overwork and managing so many roles atop their responsibilities in their home department but also a potential inability to attract future leadership into these roles because of the unrealistic expectations for the roles.

Students expressed that the flow of information could be streamlined to make it easier to find. They would appreciate a single space for all information, especially internships, rather than receiving multiple Canvas announcements scattered throughout the semester. Students would also appreciate a master calendar (perhaps in Canvas) with all ENST-related events and deadlines that could be consulted when they choose. We suggest hiring a dedicated administrator to support ENST with communications (website, social media, Canvas calendar), event planning, external recruiting, etc. This would reduce program leaders' workload, helping prevent burnout and make these roles more sustainable for future leaders. Since students appear to access information through a range of sources and modalities, we suggest having someone with communications training who could follow best practices and strategies for streamlining communication while also using modalities that work well for the student population. (see also recommendations to Dean's Office below)

We recommend that the ENST Chair and Coordinator meet with ENST staff in person a few times a semester to connect and discuss upcoming events/tasks.

## Recommendations to HSS Dean's Office

### *Strengths*

The ENST program is strongly supported by the HSS Dean's Office, yet draws from affiliated faculty from across the University and adjunct faculty practitioners. The contributions from diverse faculty is a strength of the program, and we commend the Dean's office for supporting such a truly interdisciplinary program. We see a few key challenges that the Dean's office could address to support the health and longevity of the program.

### *Challenges and Recommendations*

The adjunct reappointment process is cumbersome, requiring faculty who teach one semester every two years to fully re-apply every single time they teach, including full background checks and teaching statements. This creates a huge burden on the adjunct faculty who provide rich course offerings to the students, and help supplement the curriculum by offering their expertise in fields

not represented by faculty. The program would not offer the breadth and expertise it currently provides without the adjuncts. We recommend modification to the adjunct reappointment process to streamline reapplication for returning adjuncts. This streamlining would also reduce the administrative burden of processing the paperwork.

The program would be strengthened by better coordination and collaboration with NSM and other Colleges (as discussed above). We recommend the addition of faculty from other Colleges, particularly NSM, to the leadership team of the ENST MS program to better integrate and institutionalize interdisciplinary coordination. As such, policies regarding ENST leadership would need to be revisited to discuss strategies to structurally and financially support faculty outside of HSS to serve as ENST leaders.

As identified in the Faculty section above, affiliated faculty are somewhat disincentivized to support the ENST MS program because of their home departments' lack of recognition and support for the program. We recommend the Dean's office communicate directly with department chairs and DPCs to encourage them to count service to interdisciplinary programs like the ENST MS program toward their Re-appointment, Tenure, and Promotion process. One suggestion is that this work could be framed not as service (as it typically is) but as a professional application of research and scholarship, which would then be included in the Scholarship portion of the RTP.

We recommend that the Dean's office consider appointing the ENST program its own staff member (rather than one shared with GEOG and Aging Studies) to assist with current staff tasks and take responsibility for communications, including the website, Canvas site, social media, etc. (See above section on Program Administration).