



National Wildlife Federation®
CAMPUS
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**Ithaca College
Ithaca, New York
Spring 2008, Environmental Education and Outreach**

BACKGROUND

Campus Profile

Ithaca College (IC) is a mid-sized, comprehensive, residential college in central New York with 6,260 undergraduates and 400 graduate students. This year, for the 11th consecutive year, Ithaca was ranked among the top 10 master's degree-granting institutions in the North by *U.S. News & World Report*. Perhaps what most distinguishes an Ithaca College education is a focus on, not only "talking the talk," but "walking the walk." Within and outside the classroom, the college has long sought to provide liberal arts students with a practical understanding of life and careers, just as it has imbued students pursuing professional degrees with the core values and intellectual framework to pursue learning beyond the scope of their field. IC's embracement of sustainability in its operations and the education it provides exemplifies the "learning by doing" credo.

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GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Goals

The goals for this semester-long environmental local-history project, taught by Professor Michael Smith, were to have the students in his History of American Environmental Thought course:

- Explore the relationship between human beings and their environment at the local level.
- Learn about this relationship from studying and interpreting the source material local people have left behind.
- Develop a more complex and meaningful understanding of ecological citizenship.
- Utilize the resources of the History Center (artifacts, documents, scrapbooks, maps, photos) and other primary source materials to investigate some aspect of local environmental history.
- Experience working in small project groups.
- Develop effective public speaking skills through preparing for and delivering a public presentation of their project findings.
- Contribute their research output to the permanent holdings at the History Center.

As a result of this five-semester assignment, student teams have more deeply explored complex environmental history subjects in the city of Ithaca and Tompkins County area. Some of these topics have included Ithaca's trolley system, the Ithaca Gun site, the typhoid epidemic of 1903, 20th century farming

in the county, the Great Flood of 1935, as well as major floods in 1857 and 1972, the development of the local state park system, local opposition to a nuclear power plant, environmental history of regional aviation, Fall Creek's Mills from 1794 to 1856, squatters and environmental inequality, the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, the Ithaca Farmer's Market, ice harvesting and manufacturing, the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the county, sustainable farming and conservation, the development of the roadway system, salt mining, shoreline changes of Cayuga Lake, history of hunting in the region and development of area canals.

Most of the students participating in these projects have reported great satisfaction with the experience of learning more about their local community and working with the professional staff of the History Center. The staffers at the History Center regularly report that they have learned more about the Center's holdings through their collaboration with the students. The research work of these students has enriched the Center as a historical resource, providing new insights and source materials for future researchers to build upon. The public presentations made at the end of each semester during which the student teams present their findings have become a popular and well-attended community event. There have been few repeat topics over the course of the five semesters this program has been in effect; future goals are to similarly explore new topics with the support of the History Center of Tompkins County.

Accomplishments

In addition to the public presentations the students offer, Smith requires them each to write a reflective essay that identifies the final research question, the student's answer to that question, and their supporting evidence. Smith further asks students to explain what they learned about the region and whether they felt their relationship to this place changed. They are also tasked with explaining what they learned about the process of doing historical research and interpretation as a result of their experience. Students must provide concrete examples, explaining what they found as source material and what it was like to find and use those sources, as well as what they failed to find to support their research and some of their unanswered questions. Finally, Smith challenges students to assess whether their view of history changed and whether their experience helped them better understand environmental history.

Challenges and Responses

While students are allowed to conduct some of their research at the Ithaca College library or the Tompkins County Public Library (especially when using local newspapers), the History Center of Tompkins County is the best repository for a wide range of local history primary sources and serves as the primary resource for the student projects. Unfortunately, visiting the Center at its downtown location entails planning trips off-campus. To further complicate matters, the Center has limited hours, being open to the public only three days a week from 11am to 5pm. These situations offer access issues for some students. The Center's archivist does try to accommodate special access at other times, but gaining sufficient time to conduct the necessary research work can sometimes prove difficult.

Smith creates an additional level of challenge for the students by creating functional teams. He places students into groups of three or four according to the students' preferences for thematic areas and their majors. He deliberately crafts diverse work groups that force the students to be patient, organized and to cooperate with one another. To encourage full participation on the part of each group member, a portion of the grade for the group project is based on the students' assessment of each team member. Smith sometimes experiences difficulty obtaining small amounts of additional funding to pay honoraria for the History Center staffers, and to cover the cost of refreshments to make the public presentation a more special event.

ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Leaders and Supporters

Michael Smith is an assistant professor in the Department of History, and this environmental history course is cross-listed in both history and environmental studies. Smith has provided strong leadership for the development and delivery of this program, but he credits the professional staff of the History Center for their strong, consistent support of this endeavor. This collaboration has strengthened the relationship between the Department of History and the History Center, and has also offered another avenue for forging tighter town-gown relations. Through this experience, students are not only able to discover more about their local community, they also come to appreciate the unique educational resources available to them through the History Center.

Funding and Resources

Because this is a project within an existing course, the costs of the course are covered through student tuition. Smith likes to be able to offer the History Center staff modest honoraria in exchange for their support for the student research teams and to provide modest refreshments for the public event. These additional costs are most often covered through small grants Smith obtains from the office of the Dean of Humanities and Sciences or from the office of the Provost for service-learning projects. This is a relatively low-cost, extremely replicable model for other campuses to consider.

Community Outreach and Education

The public presentation the students offer at the end of the semester is widely advertised both internally through campus channels, including our sustainability friends Listserve and Intercom, our web-based intranet announcement board system. This event is also advertised through a regional sustainability Listserve that reaches hundreds of subscribers; and in local media event calendars and the college's web-accessible events calendar. In spring semesters, the student presentation usually coincides with EarthWeek events, so the activity benefits from this additional promotion. Further, the History Center includes this event as part of its normal events promotions, attracting the interest of history buffs in the region to a somewhat different content stream. Among all these various promotional channels, this event attracts a diverse, often entirely new audience to the local gem that is the History Center. Many attendees at past presentations have remarked that our students' work has helped them gain a new appreciation for the rich, complex environmental history.

This innovative curricular program further reinforces our local community's perception of Ithaca College as a leading proponent of sustainability in curriculum and research and community outreach.

Campus Climate Action: Your School's Carbon Footprint

If it is indeed true that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it, in having our students explore and shed public light on some of our past errors in judgment and the consequences of those actions on our environment, we learn how complex our bioregion is and perceive the need to preserve natural ecosystems. Some of the past topics our students have studied, including deforestation from development and agriculture, have indirectly pointed toward strategies to address climate change.

National Wildlife Federation's Campus Ecology® Program

While the Campus Ecology Program did not play a direct role in this project, we regularly review Campus Ecology resources for replicable models and case studies to inform our work in the areas of curriculum and research and to infuse considerations of sustainability, modifying campus operations to be more sustainable and community outreach.

CLOSING COMMENT

We offer this case study to faculty members in other history and environmental studies programs as a possible model they can adapt for their students. Most cities or counties have similar historical repositories or archivists who may be able to offer students a unique, hands-on opportunity to explore their local community through this special lens. This is a low-cost way to enliven students' experience and to foster stronger relationships between the campus and the local community.