

Public Scholarship Student Projects for Introductory Environment Courses

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Background: Education For Environmental Public Scholarship

Public scholarship is scholarship that is used to inform public debate of the issues we face as a society. Likewise, education for public scholarship connects classroom concepts to societal issues and helps students act as educated citizens within a democracy. This is especially important for environmental issues given the urgent and complex nature of these issues. For more, see the Pennsylvania State University Laboratory for Public Scholarship and Democracy, <http://www.publicscholarship.psu.edu>.

A New Course Project

This paper presents a new public scholarship project for students in introductory undergraduate courses on environmental topics. The project connects classroom content to real-world environmental issues, giving students the chance to think and act as public scholars. The project extends the strong tradition of fieldwork in geography education by getting the student out of the classroom and into the community and natural environment. The project lasts the entire semester, giving students the chance for in-depth experience. We implemented the project in two courses at Penn State during summer 2009.

Overall Project Goals

Our project was designed to meet five core goals: (1) Expose students to the ways in which they can act as public scholar. (2) Connect course material to environmental issues and to students' everyday lives. (3) Give students experience with professional environmental work, so that they can gain an appreciation of such work and decide if they want this work in their careers. (4) Build student enthusiasm for environmental issues. (5) Finally, provide the public with insights from students' scholarship. When we implemented the project in our courses, we found that it succeeded in meeting all of these goals.

Hands-On Environmental Activity

For the project, each student designs and performs a hands-on activity that allows her to intelligently engage with an environmental issue of her choice. For example, one student chose to walk instead of drive in order to address the issue of climate change. Another student chose to interview local park conservation personnel to learn about the issue of deer overpopulation. The activity gives students a chance to experience firsthand some aspect of the issue. The student must also connect the activity to course content and her chosen environmental issue.

Public Forum Presentation

At the end of the semester, each student submits key insights from her project experience to the public forum of her choice. The presentation is thus an act of public scholarship. In our implementation of the project, students submitted letters to the editor of newspapers, uploaded videos to YouTube, and created informational posters for display at city hall. To produce the content, students must reflect on what aspects of their experience are most relevant to the public and then decide how to convey this in a way that the public finds clear and compelling.