To: Patricia Terry, Environmental Science & Policy Masters Program Chair

From: Christine Style, Chair of AAC

Date: 18 December 2009

Re: Academic Affairs Council Review of Environmental Science & Policy Masters Program

Introduction:
The AAC received and reviewed the “Graduate Program in Environmental Science and Policy” academic review report in the fall of 2009. The document, written and submitted by the department Chair, Professor Patricia Terry, was dated “Fall 2007”. There was no explanation from the Dean regarding the two-year delay in presenting the document to the AAC. The AAC did not receive an updated review so our assessment is based on the 2007 information along with verbal comments from Dr. Terry and some of the ES&P graduate faculty. After reviewing the 2007 report, AAC members’ primary concern and question was if the ES&P faculty desires the ES&P Master’s Program to continue. The ES&P faculty later convinced the AAC members that there is a need to keep the graduate program with greater support from the administration and internal program modifications. This graduate program in particular has been the hallmark of the university’s environmental/community commitment since its inception in 1965. The AAC also recognizes a need for the ES&P graduate faculty to create a strong and forward thinking strategic plan to sustain its beneficent contribution to the state.

Program Accomplishments:
The ES&P program has made progress in blending the science curriculum with the politics and public policy agenda. Now the science students and policy students interact more in the classroom on communal projects designed to integrate the strengths of each area.

Recent contracts now reflect the commitment from new faculty to the graduate program. Two faculty members from Biology requested graduate status.

ES&P plans to create curricular tracks in response to community demands such as Environmental Business. They also plan to reshape courses and rename tracks to attract more students.

Advising communication has been streamlined so students get a thesis advisor early that matches their thesis topic.

Program Strengths/Weaknesses:

Strengths
The focus on Environmental Science has been a strong and steadfast component of the UWGB mission. Since its origin, UWGB has been committed to improving the environment and sustaining the quality of natural resources in our state.

To facilitate the mission, ES&P integrated the BS/MS program during the fall of 2007. The new option gives undergrad students the opportunity to progress through the system with greater insight and continuity.
The ES&P faculty is to be commended for their unified decision to retain the thesis as a central and necessary academic product of their graduate students. Without the thesis, students would miss a valuable opportunity to conduct research, to reflect on significant community, state, national, and global issues, and to express their thoughts through a carefully crafted, professionally written document.

Student exit surveys provide the faculty with information regarding general satisfaction in a number of areas. Overall, students from the past few years rated the program highly (6.0/7.0). In particular, students appreciated the relevance of their education for preparation in professional development (6.4/7.0), and valued their thesis or project work as a worthwhile learning experience (6.6/7.0). Several faculty are pursuing federal grants to support their research and to enhance the program overall.

**Weaknesses**

Although the BS/MS program allows faculty to select and promote the best local undergrads [UWGB], it also narrows the diversity of students receiving the master’s degree.

The faculty is struggling to maintain program quality at all levels, but the added responsibilities of course load, thesis advising, research mentoring, and lack of support from the administration has eroded faculty morale which may jeopardize the strength and longevity of the graduate program.

The balance in the number of policy and science students has shifted substantially toward those interested in science. The paucity of policy directed students, believed to be a direct result of the loss of student teaching assistant positions, creates an imbalance that threatens the overall quality and depth of the graduate experience in general.

The ES&P program was advised in a previous review (2004) to arrange fair compensation to faculty for thesis mentoring activities. Their response was: “...this is an administrative issue that is not under the direct control of the ES&P program and no attempt has been made at the university level to change this.” A second and related problem is due to “severe budget cuts.” Consequently, compensation to faculty for “thesis committee service has worsened.” Funds needed to compensate faculty are tied to the undergraduate program’s budget. There is no dedicated budget for the graduate program.

In an attempt to reduce financial pressure, the faculty is pursuing federal grants which may be giving them a false sense of security. Even if the grants were fully funded, they would provide little more than a temporary solution to fund a program that requires annual support from the administration.

The capstone course should be the pinnacle classroom experience of all students regardless of their particular emphases. The graduate faculty is working diligently to meet this expectation, but staffing the course and presenting relevant topics of student interest are issues that could be improved.

Finally, the lowest scores by students evaluating the program were found in the area of student advising (4.9/7.0).

**Conclusions and Recommendations:**

The AAC recommends that the administration provide fair and reasonable compensation to faculty of the ES&P graduate program for their contributions, e.g., chairing the program, advising, and thesis work.

Given the fact that several faculty members have recently relinquished their graduate status, the future of the ES&P program is at serious risk of slipping into a mundane operation run by a small number of beleaguered, demoralized professors. Clearly they are struggling to meet the
core mission of a program that was designed to “promote scholarly activity, . . . promote the economic development of the state, and offer an environment that emphasizes teaching excellence and meets the educational and personal needs of students.” In the long-run the graduate program would be best served through a separate and independent budget.

Graduate programs on many campuses throughout the UW System are viewed with envy by faculty who are not able to participate. The ES&P master’s program at UWGB however, is far from this ideal. The faculty is struggling to maintain program quality at all levels, but the added responsibilities of course load, thesis advising, research mentoring, and lack of support from the administration has eroded faculty morale which may be jeopardizing the strength and longevity of the program. The AAC specifically recommends that the administration support the masters program by (a) providing a separate and adequate budget, (b) restoring the teaching assistant positions removed from the previous budget, and (c) compensating faculty through course releases for chairing, advising students, and mentoring thesis work.

The administration should seriously considering waiving tuition for most if not all students. The addition of top quality national and international students attracted by the tuition waiver would immensely strengthen the program quality and status.

Finally, the AAC recommends that the ES&P graduate program provide us with an updated current assessment of their program by October 1, 2012. In addition to addressing the weaknesses of the program as described above, the AAC strongly urges ES&P to develop a strategic plan and set of goals to guide their program into the future regardless of budgetary constraints.

CC: Dean Derryl Block
    Associate Provost Tim Sewall
    AAC