

Collaboration and the Community: Building Multi-Course, Interdisciplinary, Experiential Projects

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Since 2014, I have been assembling teams of faculty and students to work on a series of civically engaged, multi-course, interdisciplinary projects. These projects have connected students and faculty from different disciplines, partnered with local community organizations, and produced real world impacts while providing dynamic experiential learning opportunities for the students involved. This model of interdisciplinary, project-based team work is an emerging form across universities around the globe and these efforts contribute to a developing approach to collaborative, engaged pedagogy.

In 2014, Dr. Bill Landing (Oceanography) and I combined his Environmental Science and Policy capstone class with my Digital Media Production Special Topics Class to create, *Project Nero*. This combined effort of 30 students set out to learn who was blocking clean energy legislation in the Florida Capitol and why. Bill and I managed to get our classes assigned during the same time slot and we found a classroom large enough to accommodate both classes so we could all meet as a group despite the two class designations. After a series of guest lectures ranging from Florida Wildlife Federation Director Manley Fuller to then State Representative Michelle Raywinkle Vasalinda, students were primed on the legislative landscape and the challenges of using the words “climate change” in the Capitol. This proved very frustrating to the Environmental Science majors who had been studying the evidence for the past three years and now were being told that political leaders would not even use the words “climate change.”

This effort led to the development of a series of attempts to gain media attention in hopes of getting legislators to put CC on the agenda. In addition, students developed an online media campaign that included a FaceBook page, Twitter feed, blog and a series of short videos. While the class’s efforts did not achieve all the goals we had set out, students had profound responses to the process of attempting to engage the state level political process, with a small number refocusing their careers based on this experience. To hear some of the student testimony about the impacts of this class, see this 10-minute video: <https://vimeo.com/126430242>

In 2016, the environmental group *American Rivers* designated the Apalachicola River the “most threatened river” in the U.S. This prompted a conversation between Apalachicola Riverkeeper Ex. Director Georgia Ackerman and myself, exploring the options for FSU students to help address this local crisis. Scheduling courses at FSU is done 10-12 months in advance and I managed to convince a group of faculty to sign on the what I called the *Apalachicola River Project* (ARP) for the following spring. Professors Jeremy Owen and Danny Goddard from Environmental Science and Policy contributed 80 students from the capstone course, Dr. Summer Harlow added 15 graduate students from a Social Media Campaigns Class, Dr. Diane Roberts added 15 students from her Non-Fiction Writing Seminar in English, and I had 20 Digital Media Production Students. In total, 130 students and 5 faculty from 3 different colleges agreed to collaborate, along with extensive help from our community partner, Apalachicola Riverkeeper.

The ARP was a large and complex project with many moving parts. This results of this effort are archived on the course website (<http://www.apalachicolariverproject.com/>) and reveal a powerful response from the students. The consistency and quality of the work across the project reflects a realization among the students that this was not “an assignment” – instead this was real! With Riverkeeper Dan Tonsmiere and Georgia Ackerman providing direct feedback to the students as the projects progressed, the students knew their work mattered and that this was not just a classroom exercise. This added a level of professionalism to the course expectations that would not have occurred without the engagement of the community partner.

The impacts of the ARP far exceeded our expectations. When the class ended, Georgia Ackerman and I, in cooperation with WFSU-TV, applied to the Florida Humanities Council for a grant to assemble a one-hour documentary about the Apalachicola based on the work of the students in the ARP. With FHC funding, we completed the film and *Stories From the Apalachicola: An Endangered River* aired on WFSU-TV in October 2018 and is available online at pbs.org. In addition, we have screened the film regionally to large and enthusiastic audiences eager to hear and see this story represented on film. The Apalachicola Riverkeeper continues to use the film for education, fundraising and outreach, leaving an enduring asset to this community partner working to help a river in crisis.

Project outcomes included:

- 12 field trips led by volunteers – Kayaking, hiking, water sampling, slough measurement and more.
- 5 social media campaigns focusing on:
 - Bees, Oysters, River Culture, Water War, and Economics
- 9 short videos
- Water quality sampling data
- Fundraising opportunities for community partner
- Very positive student response
- One year later, 60-minute PBS documentary with additional funding provided by the Florida Humanities Council based on the work on the ARP website.

<https://www.pbs.org/video/stories-from-the-apalachicola-an-endangered-river-nornxg/>

For the ARP, the classes did not meet at the same time so there was much less interdisciplinary team building. Instead, the different classes all contributed their respective work to the project website, creating a varied and rich collection of materials that attempted to tell the story of the endangered river that many of the students did not even know the location of prior to the class. One tangible downside of the lack of interdisciplinary team building emerged in the lack of work from Professor Robert’s students who felt they were not able to travel to the river basin to gather the material for their stories. This uneven participation is one of the struggles with coordinating this sort of project and each project I have led has provided new insights into the effective management of these efforts.

In the Spring of 2018, I was approached by Dr. Eric Chassignet, Director of COAPS and editor of the 2018 volume *Florida’s Climate*. Realizing this important book he had just finished editing was not going to be read as widely as he hoped, Eric asked for help promoting the issues

raised by the book. This led to the creation of the 2019 Florida Climate Change Collaboration happening this spring. For this project, I recruited Dr. Bill Landing and 40 of his Environmental Science Students, Dr. Stephanie Pau and 20 of her Geography students, Dr. Chari Arespacochaga and 8 of her Theater majors, and 20 graduate students from Dr. Katie Dale's Social Media Campaign class. This time we aligned all the classes to meet T/TH 11-12:15 and we have a room large enough to accommodate everyone. On Tuesdays we meet as a large group with all faculty present and on Thursdays we meet in our respective classes. We currently have 10 project groups that are comprised of a mix of students from each of the majors represented. These projects are very much "underway" so we don't know yet how successful this effort will be but the early indications are that students are excited and enjoying the process of working in interdisciplinary teams.

Looking forward to the 2019/20 academic year, I have been awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to bring this project model to Norway where I will lead the Climate Witness Project. This project will combine video production and science students to capture testimonial interviews with people who work in outdoor professions (fishermen, park rangers, glacier tour guides, etc.). These interviews will detail the observed changes to the natural world in one lifetime and then these anecdotal accounts will be paired with the data trends confirming the observations as indicative of climate change. This is an effort to add personal, emotional stories to the impersonal data of CC. The first semester will be traditional video and the second semester we will produce 360 video virtual reality experiences.

Combined, these efforts reveal the power of collaboration within and beyond the university. The range of enduring impacts include: 1) Expanded faculty working relationships and understanding, 2) Interdisciplinary student team building that mimics many real world professional settings, 3) Powerful community bridge building that brings the university assets in service to pressing local needs, 4) Widespread promotion of the quality work at FSU and the value the university contributes to the state and region.

While many talk about interdisciplinary work at FSU, I have been in the trenches making it happen, learning along the way, and developing a set of effective practices that will allow this model to be replicated at FSU and beyond.