

Final Report of Pedagogical Improvement Grant

“Transitioning Semester in the West (SITW) to new leadership and a new model”

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Overview: The PIG grant allowed five faculty members from Environmental Studies, who teach field courses and community-engaged research and learning courses to redesign Semester in the West. We met four times, including more than 13 hours of in-person meetings, plus exchanged many emails and each person dedicated time to either writing-up the new model, modeling the instructor schedule, or delineating impacts to ES 120. We carefully considered what makes SITW such a transformative and popular program, thought critically about what could be revised, and studied the logistical, financial, staffing, and administrative work related to sustaining SITW in a new model. Although efforts are still underway for financing and staffing SITW, we have developed a comprehensive plan for running, staffing and facilitating the new model.

What was the outcome of your project and how did it align with your original goals as stated in your application?

Our project developed over 4 strategic planning meetings, one on February 17, an all-day retreat at Johnston Wilderness Campus on November 9, a meeting with the CDC on November 9th and another on December 1st. Several informal meetings between paired faculty in this PIG, including discussions with Phil Brick, also occurred over this time period, allowing ideas to ferment and grow. From these meetings we developed a teaching model (attached) and budget justifications for the new model (attached). One of our main accomplishments was also a creative conceptual plan regarding thematic interests for future SITW courses. In line with our goal of thinking across, gender, race, disability and bodies, we certainly did not exhaust the need or possibilities of changing SITW to be more inclusive, but we did come up with a staffing model that invites more diversity. By offering a yearly field course, that includes three faculty members, one of whom will rotate in and out of the field (see model), with some weeks closer to Whitman college, and with themes that gesture meaningfully to environmental justice topics, we aim to transform the way SITW is taught. We hope that the model of working with three different faculty a year, one of whom will have significantly smaller commitment, can bring in newer and more diverse faculty, so that no one faculty owns the program and that experienced faculty can train future faculty who take on smaller obligations at first and those faculty grow into future SITW core faculty. Our team is explicitly committed to working with diverse students and faculty, planning options such as more “indoor” sleeping as part of the travelling course, creatively thinking of schools, community shelters, and summer camps that we could use. The newer model is also more family friendly, not requiring professors to leave their families for fourteen weeks to be with students for the whole semester. Our program devised a budget based on the advice of Phil Brick, Susan Holme and the faculty experience

running field courses for Whitman College. All members of this PIG had had experience taking students on extended field trips, or taking part in extensive outdoor education.

Susan Holme played an important part in our all-day retreat, teaching us and having conversations with us about student service support while in the field. Additionally, Stan Thayne met with Brien Sheedy and Stuart Chapin from Outdoor Programs to discuss how their work, staff and office have prepared students to take part in a field course.

What sense do you have at this point that your project has enhanced student learning and what will you be looking at in the future to know whether the project was successful?

The most promising and immediate measure of this project's positive impact on student learning is the five-faculty commitment to staff and run this signature program for the next 7 years beginning in fall 2024. In January 2023 we will be looking at whether we have a sufficient number of students applying to the course annually and if we see students with new types of interests that apply for and enter the program.

We anticipate a future SITW building on faculty work that predates the new model of SITW, including the field course, Land, Water, Justice, taught by Eunice Blavascunas and Stan Thayne; Lyman Persico's Water in the West and Geology and Environmental Studies of the Mojave Desert courses, Aaron Bobrow-Strains' Border Studies course, and M Acuff's experience with land-based art in the American West. In the future, if we have students positively commenting on, and learning through SITW programs that are self-reflexive, oriented towards learning indigenous points of view, seeing students energized by faculty creativity and expertise, then we will know that we have succeeded.

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

It was difficult to bring the faculty together in the spring 2022, due to logistical reasons, but we more than made up for this in the fall with a one day retreat. The project is also necessarily limited by an explicit commitment to a future budget based on the current model, which exceeds the budget already allocated for SITW. Thus, there is still work to be done to estimate the cost difference and ES staffing more specifically, which we plan to project in January 2023. We have received a detailed list of concerns and a strong letter of commitment from the CDC, with the caveat that what we have developed is a first-step.

How do you envision sharing the results of your work with other colleagues at Whitman (or elsewhere?)

Any sharing out of our results is premature until we have the explicit commitment of the CDC, the Board of Trustees, and the Chief Financial Officer. We will continue our work this spring in order to be able to list the course in the catalogue for fall 2024. Once we have approval from

the appropriate bodies, we will present our design either at a Faculty Meeting for discussion and/or at a Faculty Forum.