

11/24/10

To the Student Sustainability Committee:

As the incoming Director of the new Sustainability Studies Initiative in the Humanities (SSIH), I direct this letter of inquiry and attached vision statement to the committee's attention. I would direct your attention, in particular, to goals 2 and 3 of the statement, which references the Initiative's ambitions to sponsor curriculum development in the human dimensions of sustainability, an educational field in which the campus is sorely lacking. After discussions with Steve Marshak and Jonathan Tomkin at SESE, it was apparent that the glaring lack of curricular offerings in environmental humanities was inhibiting the proper growth of the School, specifically its "Society and Environment" stream, designed to attract and service those many potential undergraduate majors interested in sustainability, but who lack aptitude or interest in the technical science streams that currently dominate the SESE major.

The Initiative begins with a cohort of about a dozen faculty members across a range of humanities disciplines. With sufficient funds, we hope to encourage course development among this cohort, with the parallel aim of recruiting other faculty whose research profiles do not currently reflect a sustainability paradigm to participate in SSIH education workshops and seminars, and from there apply for course development funding.

On the subject of funding, meetings with Dean Watkins this past spring and fall have yielded strong verbal commitments of support, and the tentative earmarking of funds in the order of 20k annually. These funds, however, have not been forthcoming as yet, and I have been waiting further communication from the Dean about SSIH for several months. Steve Marshak and I have continued to make plans for the Initiative during this period, and will soon be publicizing a launch event for early February, with a keynote lecture by Henry Henderson, director of the Chicago chapter of the NRDC, followed by a day of panels featuring visiting environmental humanists in literary and cultural studies.

In a discussion with Suhail Barot this week, he suggested that a matching grant proposition from the SSC might encourage the Dean to release the LAS funds to the Initiative, allowing the crucial work of sustainability curriculum development in the humanities to begin, and indeed materially accelerating that work. Thank you for consideration of this idea as the basis for a formal proposal for SSC funding.

Sincerely,

Gillen Wood
Nicholson Professor in English
Director, Sustainability Studies Initiative in the Humanities

SUSTAINABILITY STUDIES INITIATIVE IN THE HUMANITIES

Vision Statement

Overview

It is clear that stresses upon natural resources and the environment will increasingly dominate global affairs—and the everyday lives of billions of people—in this century and beyond. In the United States, the expectation of environmental literacy now touches all levels of public policy, industry, and the professions, while the responsibility for rich and diverse programs in environmental sustainability has rapidly evolved into a core mission of research universities. Programs in sustainability nationwide, including the *School for Earth, Society, and Environment (SESE)* at Illinois, boast well-developed interdisciplinary structures that connect the physical and technical sciences with economics, policy, and social science. The *Sustainability Studies Initiative in the Humanities (SSIH)*, to be housed within *SESE*, is designed to complement and enhance these interdisciplinary synergies with humanistic perspectives from a broad range of fields. With unique disciplinary expertise in the study of history, culture, ethics, fine arts, politics, and law, humanists are indispensable to the collective research and educational task of addressing global environmental change in its multiple human dimensions.

Goals

1. To define a new discipline of sustainability studies in the humanities, involving close engagement with the physical and social sciences.
2. To develop a sustainability studies faculty cohort in the humanities, with a focus on collaborative research and grant writing, curriculum development, and to assist in faculty recruitment.
3. To materially enhance the Society and Environment stream within the *SESE* major with a greater range of course offerings in the humanities.

Activities

Potential *SSIH* activities include:

1. **Affiliate faculty:** build 0% time humanities faculty cohort within *SESE*.
2. **Curriculum development:** fellowships for humanities faculty for course development in sustainability tailored to their respective disciplines.
3. **Public Events:** High-profile campus events such as visiting speaker series, roundtables and conferences on sustainability and the humanities (including active experimentation with technologically innovative, low-footprint alternatives such as paperless seminars and virtual conferences).
4. **Online Presence:** Development of professional quality webpage—accessible through *SESE* homepage—featuring events page, discussion forums, sustainability news links, information on faculty research, and interactive opportunities for students