

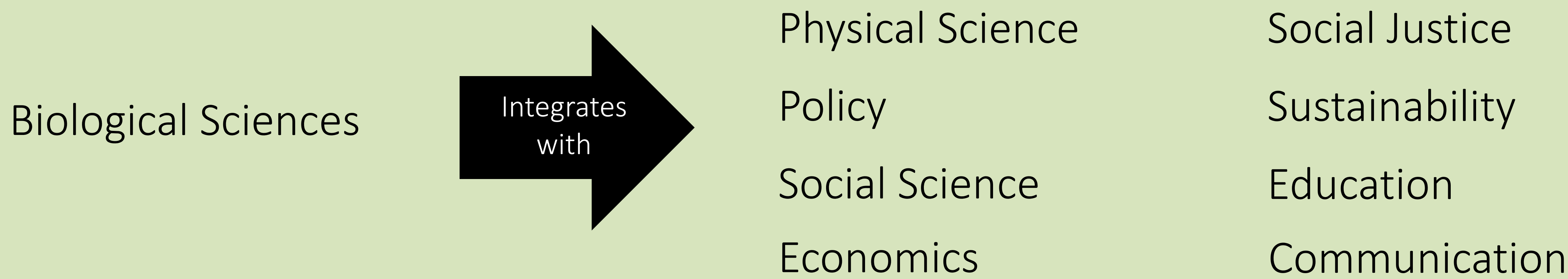
The Smithsonian-Mason Semester:

Advancing innovative ways to teach the practice of conservation

A. DeLuycker, J. Buff, S. Lessard-Pilon, J. McNeil

A Change in Conservation:

To meet the urgent demand for a sustainable world, the field of conservation must rapidly expand its scope and impact. This means moving beyond the traditional approach of conservation biology to a more **inclusive model**:



How do we create this change?

We aim to **teach conservation as conservation is practiced** through a multi-disciplinary, solution-oriented lens. In small classes, undergraduate students learn side-by-side with professionals and are mentored by faculty and conservation practitioners. Students gain employable skills in addressing complex problems in an experiential setting. Our intent is to augment students' existing university coursework and engage students from many majors and disciplines. The effectiveness of these efforts are continuously evaluated and assessed using pre-and post- course student assessment of learning gains surveys. Below we outline the four main strategies we use to reach our goal of creating future leaders in the field of conservation.

Our main strategies:



Engaging students in grand challenges in conservation

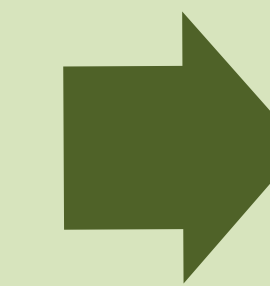
What?

Using an approach rooted in current, complex conservation problems, students learn practical, real-world skills to address today's challenges.



How?

Course content is delivered through an integrative approach to help students apply practical, real-world strategies from diverse disciplines.



How do we know it works?

Students produce case study projects and proposals to mitigate problems or monitor and assess species and habitats of conservation concern to public audiences and stakeholders.



Building a community of practice

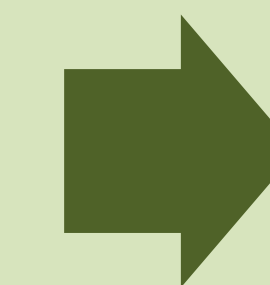
What?

Students learn from experts within conservation and interact with peers from diverse backgrounds to experience the interdisciplinary nature of the field.



How?

These experts serve as mentors, and students are drawn from any major, which increases productive interactions and collaborations.



How do we know it works?

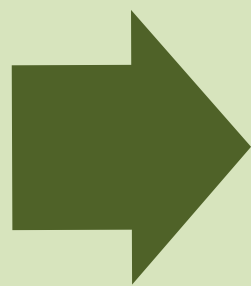
Alumni leverage these connections and have very high job, graduate school and internship placement rates in the field of conservation as a result.



Providing intentional mentoring to foster growth

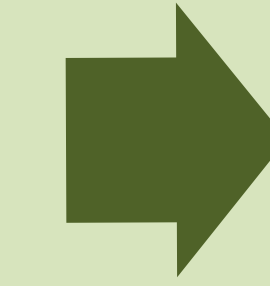
What?

Faculty mentor students through individualized attention, small class sizes, and low student/faculty ratios. Intentional mentoring focuses on written, oral and collaborative skills.



How?

Students are intentionally guided to develop a professional network from their Semester interactions.



How do we know it works?

Students use these relationships to aid in professional development and our alumni maintain these connections via social media and alumni events.



Assessing and revising academic programming

What?

Learning gains are systematically evaluated using pre- and post-assessments. Long-term career development outcomes in our alumni will be investigated.



How?

Data focuses on measuring improvement and include qualitative interview-style questions for alumni focusing on how well our programs prepare students for careers.



How do we know it works?

We are able to use these results practically for semester preparation and adapt course learning objectives, content, activities, and assignments.

We would like to thank all of the Smithsonian and Mason faculty that have helped with this program, as well as our outside partners, without whom this program would not be possible. All images courtesy of George Mason University's Creative Services.