

ENVIRONMENTAL CONVERSATIONS

Juliet Patterson, Rolvaag Memorial Library 405
507-786-3440
pattersj@stolaf.edu
wp.stolaf.edu/encon/

Environmental Conversations — or “EnCon” as it is known on campus — is an interdisciplinary learning community open to all St. Olaf students interested in an integrated exploration of environmental questions, challenges, and possibilities. As a first-year conversation program, students take three sequenced courses (one each semester and one during January term) that fulfill three OLE Core curriculum requirements. Students who go on to major or concentrate in Environmental Studies also receive credit for ENVST 137: Introduction to Environmental Studies.

The Environmental Conversations curriculum is shaped by guiding questions and delivered in an integrated, collaborative fashion wherein teaching faculty work together to create and teach EnCon courses. Because the program’s faculty hail from a variety of academic disciplines, students can expect to encounter methods and material from the social sciences, arts and humanities, and natural sciences.

Intended Learning Outcomes for the Program

Upon completion of the Environmental Conversations Program, students are equipped to demonstrate:

1. Knowledge of the integral nature of Earth’s relationships, including those within and among Earth’s systems and the mutual influences of Earth’s systems, flow of goods and services, cultures, and worldviews;
2. Employment of such knowledge in the interpretation of environmental challenges and in the analysis of particular cases;
3. Development of creative responses to local and global environmental challenges; and
4. Reflection upon one’s own ecological vocation and those of communities to which one belongs.

Admission to the Program

Students apply to the Environmental Conversations program after they are admitted to the college. Each year about 40 first-year students are admitted to the program. EnCon is open to students of all interests and provides an appropriate foundation for any major at the college.

Coursework Overview

Fall: Life in the Anthropocene

What are ways of understanding and/or defining “environment?” How do I consider, explore and act within the places and relationships I inhabit? How do others consider, explore and act within the places and relationships they inhabit? What are some of today’s most pressing environmental challenges and what is the systemic nature of those challenges? What stories have been/are told about our environment and who narrates these stories?

January term: Big Data & Bigger Challenges

How is data collected, analyzed, modeled, and applied in fields collectively understood as environmental studies? Who or what are ecological actors, systems, and services and what is their value to one another? What are ethical considerations of environmental decision-making?

Spring: Imagineering Earth’s Future

Human beings appear hard-wired for story - telling them, creating them, and living within them. Building upon integral forms of knowledge, what are effective and creative ways to communicate environmental information? What motivates and inspires human beings to nurture existing relationships with their environment and/or to seek a change in those relationships? What are strategies and actions for solving environmental challenges? What role will I play in Earth’s future?

Course Equivalents for OLE Core Attributes

By successfully completing the Environmental Conversations program, students complete the following OLE Core curriculum requirements:

First-Year Seminar (FYS)

Writing & Rhetoric (WRR)

Courses

ENCON 110: *Life in the Anthropocene*

Students begin the conversation with three basic questions: 1) Who am I and what is my relationship with the environment? 2) How can I express that relationship to others? and 3) What is my environmental role in my community? To answer these questions, students explore their environmental selves through collaborative conversations, group activities, and critical thinking exercises. Through common readings, students hone their research skills, improve oral and written performance, and reflect on what it is to learn among a community of scholars. This course is the first in a three-course Conversation Program.

ENCON 111: *Big Data and Bigger Challenges*

The field of environmental studies explores how different parts of the Earth system interact with each other, as well as the role that we - as humans - have in shaping our surroundings. In this introductory class, students draw upon a network of scientific, economic, political, and ethical concepts and assemble a toolkit for approaching environmental problems creatively and analytically. Building upon work in the fall EnCon course, students take a deep look at three broad, current environmental issues: climate change, resources, and waste. This course is the second in a three-course Conversation Program.

Prerequisite: ENCON 110.

ENCON 112: *Imagineering Earth's Future*

Building on explorations in the Fall and January Term, this course will examine the following questions: What motivates and inspires human beings to nurture existing relationships with their environment and/or to seek a change in those relationships? What are strategies and actions for solving environmental challenges? What role will I play in Earth's future? (and in my community...). In navigating these questions, students will look through an interdisciplinary lens, engaging with a sustained research paper, creating art, and thinking about how we can take scholarship and personal explorations and translate them into civic engagement. This course is the third of a three-course Conversation Program.

Prerequisites: ENCON 110 and ENCON 111.

Faculty

Program Director, 2024-2025

Juliet Patterson

Associate Professor of Practice in English
creative writing; contemporary American poetics; hybrid literature;
environmental literature

Vivian Choi

Associate Professor of Sociology/Anthropology
South Asia; science and technology; disasters

Jacob Grossman

Assistant Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies

Anthony D. Lott (on sabbatical calendar year (Feb 2025-Jan 2026))

Associate Professor of Political Science and Environmental Studies
international law; international relations; international security

Sequoia Nagamatsu

Associate Professor of English
fiction; creative nonfiction

Patricia Zimmerman

Associate Professor of Practice in Religion
Christian mysticism; history of Christianity; women and religions