

Grant Supports Environmental Research at Pacific Lutheran University

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With a \$90,000 grant, the Environmental Studies Program at Pacific Lutheran University intends to provide students and faculty members with more opportunities for research and creative projects.

The program received the funding from the Wiancko Charitable Foundation in early December. The program's faculty determined the money would support annual student-faculty research and creative projects, a mini-grant program, and provide for a faculty workshop in May and a summer research retreat.

"We talked about how we could best take advantage of this particular opportunity, and what's important for environmental studies at PLU and for the students," said William Teska, professor of biology and chair of environmental studies.

"We want to use the funds in a way that makes the maximum impact for PLU, but also for the environment," he added. "We want to make the world a better place, and to make our region a better place."

The grant provides a unique opportunity to move the already strong Environmental Studies Program to a truly superb one, while also building on its interdisciplinary nature, Teska said. The activities supported by the grant will be open and available to any and all faculty members with an interest in the environment, regardless of their academic discipline.



Assistant biology professor Michael Behrens conducting field work on the Olympic Peninsula last summer (Photo by Jordan Hartman)

"We utilize interdisciplinary studies here because we truly want to come together to solve environmental problems," Teska said. He added that the smaller size and strong community of PLU makes it easier for faculty members to work with peers across campus.

This interdisciplinary approach is evident in the first round of student-faculty research projects funded by the grant: one led by assistant biology professor Michael Behrens, another by Claire Todd, visiting assistant geosciences and environmental studies professor, and the third by philosophy professor Erin McKenna.

Announced on March 14, the awards include a faculty stipend that follows the compensation guidelines of the natural sciences, Teska said. The goal is for each project to produce a result, say a paper or project, and for the researchers to communicate their findings to local stakeholders.

For his project, Behrens and two students will examine how temperature affects the diet and digestive physiology of herbivorous and omnivorous prickleback fishes. Todd and one student will look at glacier responses to climate change in Mount Rainier National

Park and the impact on regional water resources. Finally, McKenna and two students will study meat production and the environment.

Mini-grants are also available for students and faculty interested in projects to improve the environment. Up to \$500 will be available for projects. Applications are due May 7 at noon. More information and applications is available at the [Environmental Studies Web site](#).

The interdisciplinary approach of the Environmental Studies Program is not unique at PLU, Teska added. A number of PLU programs – Chinese Studies, Global Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies, to name a few – are designed to bring together two or more academic disciplines.

“Within the culture and fabric of PLU are these interdisciplinary approaches,” Teska said. “It makes us stronger.”

A workshop sponsored by the grant on May 27 to 29 will examine the state of Clover Creek. Workshop participants will look at data gathered each spring by the [“Environmental Methods of Investigation”](#) course, which charts the health of the creek and the community, and determine what’s changed, what needs to be done and how it can be done better.

The workshop is open to all faculty. To participate, contact Teska at teska@plu.edu or ext. 7128.

The final activity planned is a summer research retreat. It will bring together Behrens, Todd, McKenna, their student researchers and other PLU faculty to work on projects together, such as the health of Puget Sound, Teska said.

“We will demonstrate with evidence that we have the capacity to do these innovative, creative, interdisciplinary explorations,” Teska said. “It’s another piece that we can document that PLU is distinctive.”

University Communications staff writer Megan Haley compiled this report. Comments, questions, ideas? Please contact her at ext. 8691 or at haley_mk@plu.edu.