



Graduate Research Consultant (GRC) Program Course Example

Social Sciences: Anthropology

Faculty name: Dr. Flora Lu

Department: Anthropology, Ecology Curriculum and Institute for the Environment

Course ANTH 539: *Environmental Justice*

GRC: Carla Norwood, Ecology

Number of students: 30

Date: Course taught for the first time in Fall Semester 2007

Course overview:

The Environmental Justice (EJ) movement addresses issues of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status in light of environmental problems and policy-making. It examines the role of power, privilege and prejudice as key concepts explaining patterns including: the siting of toxic waste incinerators and uranium mines on native lands and impoverished communities; the inaccessibility of healthy, inexpensive food in innercities; the exclusion of the poor and disenfranchised in land use policies such as protected area establishment; and the export of electronic waste to the Global South.

This undergraduate course integrates community-based research, service-learning, and group projects to foster research skills, critical thinking, and civic responsibility and participation. In collaboration with community partner organizations across the state, this course focuses on issues of local food systems and sustainability, locally unwanted land uses (such as industrial hog farms), and exclusionary practices in policymaking (such as top-down biodiversity conservation). The course consists of lectures, in-class discussions, working meetings about research and service projects, and student presentations. Students are required to undertake group service-learning projects.

Course research methodology: Community-based research

In community-based research, the nature of research projects is determined by the community partners in collaboration with the instructor. Students carry out the research using appropriate methods and present their findings to the community partners. The 3 course projects described below are examples of community-based research in that the design and parameters of the projects came from community organizations working in the Environmental Justice movement. Groups like Concerned Citizens of Tillery and the Center for Community Action (Roberson County, NC) identified key areas where they needed information and/or knowledge transfer to assist in their campaign and community education efforts.

Examples of specific student group research projects:

1. UNC Institutional Food Assessment

Overview and purpose: With the interest in locally produced, organic food, UNC-CH Food and Vending Services expressed an interest in projects that could continue the trend of increasing local/organic food purchases for the dining halls. This project included an analysis of consumption and purchasing decisions by UNC, a search for local agricultural organization/networks and what is produced locally, identification of barriers to local farmers to supplying food to UNC (e.g., federal standards, coordination among small farmers), and finally a survey of the level of understanding/demand among UNC students regarding local food and organic food. The research team was interested in ascertaining what students would like to eat/buy and whether local and organic food was important to students.

Research skills used: focus groups; background data research

2. Concerned Citizens of Tillery and Hog Waste Treatment Technologies Assessment

Overview and purpose: Concerned Citizens of Tillery (CCT), based in Tillery, NC, is a grassroots Environmental Justice organization based in a predominantly low-income, agricultural and African-American community which has been targeted for the establishment of industrial hog farms. They expressed their desire for UNC students to undertake research about the five new technologies being considered for handling hog waste. CCT wanted detailed background information on these processes as well as an assessment of the benefits and costs of each (e.g., dangers, health effects, environmental effects, energy requirements, waste products created and their disposal, any jobs created). They requested and

received various deliverables from the student team: a presentation at the end of the semester course symposium, a poster accessible for a lay audience to be used in presentations, and 250 brochures to be handed out to community members that clearly explains both the problems created by lagoons and explains the alternatives.

Research skills used: interviews with industrial representatives and academics, community visits to Tillery to obtain familiarity with the residents and their problems, internet and documentary data collection on new technologies, and comparative analysis of benefits/costs.

3. Center for Community Action Documentation

Overview and purpose: For 24 years, the Center for Community Action (CCA) has been a base for both effective and successful grassroots, multiracial community action and empowerment programs in rural Robeson County, N.C., one of the most racially diverse as well as poverty stricken counties in the state. Students worked closely with CCA Director Rev. Mac Ledgerton to document one of the most protracted and successful Environmental Justice campaigns in the history of the organization—the battle to stop the GSX corporation from dumping toxic waste into the Lumber River. Students conducted oral history interviews with politicians and community activists, organized and synthesized primary sources from the organization and newspaper coverage, took video footage of their research, and wrote a draft report (to be edited into a journal publication) in order to document the work of this organization and the lessons to be learned from this hallmark campaign.

Research skills used: oral histories, investigation of primary sources, documentary

Communicating research findings:

To communicate their findings to the community partners, each student group wrote up a final project report and presented their results orally at an end-of-the-semester symposium. Students with outstanding projects were encouraged also to present at service-learning and Environmental Justice conferences. The students involved in the CCT project were acknowledged for their excellence at the Office for Undergraduate Research student research conference at UNC and their poster was put on display on campus.

GRC role in the research:

Because many of the students did not have much prior research experience, and because of the need to produce satisfactory and rigorous products for the community partners, the GRC played a central role in the class by assisting project teams with developing research plans, designing survey instruments (if appropriate), identifying sources of information (from archives to the internet) and resources on campus, determining "best practices" for communicating and collaborating with community partners, and guiding the sharing of information in a manner accessible to a lay audience.

GRC: Carla Norwood, a doctoral candidate in Ecology, was selected as the GRC because we were already collaborating on the development of the course. She had conducted her own research in rural communities in NC for many years and possessed solid experience in participatory research methods.

Faculty comments on her course and incorporating research:

I am very excited about this type of community collaborative, active learning approach in pedagogy which enhances student engagement and knowledge retention, hones research and communication skills, and fosters student engagement with the larger community. This course was the most rewarding teaching experience I had in my years at Carolina.

Sources for this summary: Edited text from Dr. Flora Lu's GRC Proposal, class observation and interviews.