

Chesapeake Project Reflections  
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The three days I spent as part of this year's Chesapeake Project workshop were far more intense, inspiring, and informative than I had anticipated. I had heard from others what a great opportunity this was, but it wasn't until I participated myself that I discovered what incredible resources we have on campus to promote sustainability.

I plan to incorporate sustainability and environmental politics into all the classes I teach because the issues are so pressing and so far-reaching, but the one that I will redesign this upcoming academic year is my "Literary Maryland" class (ENGL289). Students in Literary Maryland explore the poetry, prose, and theater of our state. The course starts millions of years in the past when the rising and falling of the glacier caps carved out the Chesapeake Bay and its 5 major tributaries. After some dizzying jumps forward in time, we end in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the writings of Lucille Clifton, George Pelecanos, and others.

My syllabus had a couple of environmentalist themes and outcomes prior to my joining the Chesapeake project. I was already aware of how our perception of nature has changed dramatically during the past 500 years through science and economics, and I was particularly mindful going into the class of the urgency of incorporating social justice with environmental protection. The principles of the environmental justice movement were already informing some of the text selections I had made for Literary Maryland. It also informed the way I taught the evolution and cultural transformation of Maryland's economy as it changed from an exploitative, resource-intensive tobacco society to an exploitative, resource-intensive industrial economy and then "knowledge economy."

The Chesapeake Project gave me tools that I know will have a powerful intellectual and personal impact on my students. The scientific data we saw at the Merrill Center and in our readings helped me to see more clearly how interconnected the issues truly are. I knew this abstractly beforehand, but it was a visceral experience to see the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's report on the poor health of the bay, to be near the beautiful shores of the Bay, to read about "life-cycle assessments," and to know that all of these things are linked to the policy choices and cultural shifts we read about in Maryland literature. Students in Literary Maryland go on field trips, and when I taught the class last fall we went to the Chesapeake Bay Museum in St. Michael's. That was a great experience, but I'm thinking for this upcoming year I'm going to have the students go to the Philip Merrill center for an interactive tour. Although the Chesapeake Project Faculty Fellows didn't go out on the water, from the way it was described it sounds like a powerful experience. Part of the reason I teach Literary Maryland is because I want students to gain from the literature and the history a deep love of the place they live and learn, for all of its flaws and contradictions. The Chesapeake is at the center of Maryland's history and its literature, and I think having an up-close experience will help reinforce this love and hopefully create or reinforce in students a practical commitment to protect it.

You'll see in the syllabus I'm attaching the several aspects of the class that involve ecology and sustainability. I've highlighted in yellow the specific parts of the syllabus that I've added as a result of my participation in the Chesapeake Project. The first 3 changes involved adding or narrowing language in the course description to draw student attention to the specific questions and vocabulary we'll be using to think about Maryland literature's relationship to ecology. The 4<sup>th</sup> and biggest change was a sentence that I added to the learning outcome related to sustainability. I made clear as part of this learning outcome that by the end of the semester students would be able to show the ability to make "specific

and practical” connections between what the poetry, prose, and drama they read and at least one contemporary environmental problem. To see if students have attained this goal, I have created what I am calling a Literature and Sustainability project. There are 3 parts to this writing project. In the first part, students have to locate, research, and report on a specific ecological concern in the state of Maryland. Possible examples include farm runoff in the upper Susquehanna, the impact of climate change on the fishing industry, or invasive species in Maryland waterways. This section of the project will be about 500 words long, and I will require that it summarize and comment on scientific data. In the second part of the project, students will write a short section (500 words or so) on how Maryland’s literary history helps us think creatively and originally about the causes, effects, and remedies related to the particular problem the student has chosen to write about. In the third section, the student will write a letter to an elected official who is in a position to make decisions connected to their environmental problem. Using their writing skills, their critical reasoning skills, and what they’ve learned in their research, they will urge the elected official to take a particular course of action. Students can send their letter if they’d like, but they don’t have to.

I put my Chesapeake Project Faculty Fellow sticker on the door to my office, and (as designed) I think about my experience my summer and the things I learned each time I enter. The workshop was definitely something of a Trojan horse. You told me I would leave with information I could give to my students, but the first thing I got out of the class was information and inspiration to make changes in my own life. Since the seminar ended, I have plugged my major electronic devices into strip cords that I power off at the end of each night. I signed up for Pepco’s Energywise program, which temporarily dials back energy consumption during peak usage periods. I’ve stopped taking the 10-15 minute hot showers that I had a weakness for, and I find myself doing a cradle-to-grave analysis for each item I purchase. This sounds like a lot of killjoy, but I must say that as I approach my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday (this August 6!) the Chesapeake Project was a valuable opportunity for me to think about what really matters in life.