MEMO

To: Review Committee, Innovative Teaching Showcase Award
Center for Instructional Innovation & Assessment

From: Troy D. Abel 

Date: December 4, 2017

RE: Showcase application materials

Dear colleagues:

I am excited, honored, and humbled to be nominated for the 2017 innovative teaching showcase on engaging social justice. I know so many WWU colleagues whose work exemplifies this year's showcase. If selected, I'm looking forward to working with Justina and her staff to organize and present my pedagogy, projects, and activities that promote a deep engagement among my students and colleagues with the challenge of environmental racism.

In the following pages, I hope to provide you with a sense of the ways I engage this challenging issue with both my students and colleagues. However, I would be remiss if I did not recognize and share that my engagement with social justice and its environmental form is far from my own doing. I found fertile ground for these issues after moving to WWU in 2006 and among colleagues and students in my own college, in the Department of Political Science, Woodring's Center for Education, Equity and Diversity (CEED), Bellingham's ReSources, the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition and Cleveland High School in Seattle, and that city's Georgetown and South Park neighborhoods. I sincerely hope that I'll be able to formally and publically thank those many individuals in the Showcase who have empowered the work I partially summarize next.

Since the early nineties as a doctoral student in public policy, one of my research programs focused on how some communities achieve more environmental protection than others. At the time, protests and research on pollution disparities for nonwhite and poor communities rattled environmental policy institutions in the United States (US). Labelled environmental racism, scholars were documenting the unfair treatment and meaningless involvement of people in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies because of their race, color, national origin, or income. One of my professor's invited me and other graduate students into a study group that began deliberating over this new environmental issue. Between 1999 and 2002, a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant supported our work and that experience shaped both my pedagogy and scholarship since.

Pedagogy

Like that professor, I have labored to ensure that my teaching and scholarly efforts are not siloed activities, but exemplary of a praxis where, as one academic phrased it, ""The dash between teacher and scholar is a link, not a line of demarcation." In my **teaching philosophy statement** that's included in this application, you'll find my discussion of my pedagogy of what has been called *deliberative engagement*. All of my students experience this philosophy in my discursive classroom and through essay exams, critical writing assignments, and facilitated

peer discussions. Moreover, two of my classes introduce students to, and then consistently engage them with the topic of environmental justice. The antithesis of environmental racism, I believe these topics are one of the toughest environmental problems we rarely discuss as environmental teachers, practitioners, and students.

In one of the syllabi I've included in this application, you'll see that I first introduce the challenge of environmental justice in session 8 of my **Science in the Policy Process course** (ENVS 450). The students begin their deliberative engagement with this social justice challenge by reading my new co-authored chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice* and viewing two online videos that discuss EJ from two of the most popular information platforms in recent times—TEDx and *The Daily Show*. These treatments of EJ are then complemented during my lecture by introducing them to two voices from my South Seattle research on the sharp edge of environmental injustice in supposedly one of the most sustainable cities in North America. I use a pseudonym to protect one person's identity.

John participated in my facilitated group mapping project in 2014 where I asked participants to describe one air pollution experience they or their family had faced? His visceral soccer story about a South Seattle experience is disconcerting for the Emerald City. He recounted smelling and tasting metallic emissions while his adolescent son practiced soccer in one of the city's parks. I recount how his voice carried both anguish and fear for a father living a playing in a different Seattle where a small industrial operation and its pollution shared a border with his child's playground.

Second, I show the first part of a video recorded by one of our visual journalism majors. In this *Surrounded by Industry* story, Kelly's voice is what a viewer first hears and she recounts how on the one hand, she fears her son could contract asthma from the air pollution in South Seattle. On the other hand, she describes that it's not economically feasible for the family to follow their doctor's advice and move. These voices allow students to recognize how environmental racism is not some abstract and academic concept, it's happening to people in Seattle, and it will likely be a challenge they themselves will confront in their professional lives if not sooner.

In the second **syllabus for Environmental Policy Analysis** (ENVS 454), EJ is a theme for the entire class and at the beginning, students engage in a normative assessment of their professional futures in response to three questions. Who does an environmental professional serve? Who has and should have influence in a democracy? Finally, is the role of an environmental professional purely about providing information and recommendations or to educate stakeholders and the public? I also introduce the following continuum of community engagement in research in a lecture. This exercise helps them see how their responses would be distributed across this spectrum.

Typically, policy analysts and most environmental professionals work on the left hand side of this continuum. I then describe my own progression across this spectrum. In my early work, my research was *on* communities and then shared through outreach. Communication flowed from me to the community. For example, my first EJ publication about Seattle's skewed riskscape was featured on the Seattle P-I website and titled "Is Seattle creating ghettos of poverty and pollution?" I then explain how this research described what South Seattle environmental justice groups had been protesting about for decades. Their Duwamish River was Seattle's most polluted waterbody and their air quality was the worst in the city and probably in the state. However, I only moved to the second stage when community activists invited me to join a proposal for the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2014 Collaborative Problem Solving for Environmental Justice program.

Projects

We were successful and I describe this third step in my progression by introducing my students to the Duwamish Community Action for Clean Air (DCA4CA). In 2014, my research evolved to be *with* the community. However, I also ensured that this collaboration became an important experiential opportunity for my students beyond the classroom. On my WWU website, I share this perspective on my integration of research and pedagogy. "My scholarship informs a teaching program where I have been committed to fostering an interactive classroom and student research collaborations. I know from my own scholarship and the growing body of work on learning that becoming an environmental problem-solver is more than just awareness of information gained from lectures and readings. Environmental leadership is better fostered by the alchemy of disciplinary knowledge, responsibility, self-efficacy, and experiential education." Thus, I incorporated graduate and undergraduate student opportunities into the DCA4CA through what I called the "Mapps for Environmental Justice Initiative" (MEJI). It combined mapping with mobile device app development to help support the Duwamish Vally communities.

First, instead of asking for a share of the EPA grant resources, I told our community partners that WWU, my students, and I had resources to contribute to the clean air project. For example, every Huxley student is required to take ten credits of experiential education coursework in the form of either an internship, study abroad, senior thesis, or senior project (ENVS 498a, b, c, or d). Second, we translated this requirement into a 300-hour obligation for the students and in return, they have the opportunity to work for environmental groups, agencies, or help conduct research with graduate students and/or faculty. For the grant proposal, we converted those hours along with one month of my time over the two years into an "in-kind" match totaling a maximum of over $45,000 and a minimum of over $34,189. I recruited then graduate student Stacy Clauson and former undergraduates Taylor Obata and Lauren Templeton to contribute to the project and they became critical contributors to the collaboration. In fact, this kind of experiential education where I collaborate with students in the engagement of environmental justice challenges is a centerpiece of my WWU career.

In 2011, two WWU undergraduates collaborated with me and the environmental justice organization "The Forgotten People" based in Tuba City, AZ. Their mission is to improve the well-being of the Dine' people who live on the Navajo Nation in Arizona. After a presentation I made at an EPA conference, representatives from the Forgotten People asked if I could help them create maps similar to the ones I had presented from my Seattle research. I shared this request in my environmental policy analysis course and undergraduates Jarrett Wheeler and Bob Sabie volunteered to collaborate and earn ENVS 498 credits. Their reports were titled *The Right for Environmental Self-Determination in Diné Country* and *Participatory mapping and environmental justice for the Navajo Nation* respectively. The second project also involved the development of an online mapping tool that we submitted to the EPA's Apps for the Environment Challenge. Sabie's work won national runner-up for the student competition.

This participatory action research and engagement with EJ challenges became a foundation and inspiration for ten more student EJ related collaborations including: (1) *Just sustainability in Seattle: nonprofits and civic environmentalism* by undergraduate Dan Kostek; (2) *Assessing EPA's EJ Small Grants Program* by undergraduate Megan Sarver: (3) *Cleaner air with green infrastructure: the case for South Park and Georgetown* by undergraduate Taylor Obata; (4) *Magnetic biomonitoring of polluted trees in South Seattle* by undergraduate Lauren Templeton; (5) *Community engaged research for efficacy and health in Seattle* by undergraduate Annemarie Davis; (6) *Problems, promises, and progress in EPA's EJ small grants program* by undergraduate Demaree Trull; (7) *Pollution biomonitoring curriculum for environmental justice* by undergraduate Jill Needham; (8) *Biomonitoring in Seattle: mapping spatial variation of PM concentrations in Industrial and high-traffic areas*

by MS student Saba Asefa; (9) *Blurred vision: evaluating the legacy of Puget Sound Smart Growth* by MS student Stacy Clauson; and (10) *Airborne particles associated with metal accumulation and biomarker response in lichen* by MS student Gunnar Guddal. In sum, all of these students progressed with me from the classroom to their projects by hearing and reading about the voices of environmental injustice, hearing about my work on environmental disparities in class presentations, reading and contemplating my publications on Seattle's riskscape, and then transforming into a voice for environmental justice. I've included one of my key EJ publications titled **Skewed riskscapes and gentrified inequities** co-authored with then MS student Jonah White in this application.

Identity Exploration Techniques

I also recognize that becoming an effective voice for environmental justice also demands some preparation. I implore my students and colleagues who mostly are Caucasian that they first need to interrogate their white privilege. Then, they need to engage through listening to the voices from communities confronting environmental racism. I have begun to model that first process in a facilitated workshop presentation I developed in collaboration with political scientist Dr. Vernon Johnson. We've alternatively labeled them "What's up with White environmentalism" for a Department of Environmental Studies' brownbag and "Confessions of an Environmental Racist" for a Bellingham environmental group's workshop.

We began each by introducing participants to the work of Robin DiAngelo who is a White professor, anti-racist educator, and author of *What It Means to be White*. She also wrote an op-ed for the Seattle Times in 2014 that we use as a primer for the brownbag and workshop participants. She summarized some well-documented patterns and beliefs that make it difficult for white people to understand racism as a system. For instance, "whites are taught to see themselves as individuals, rather than as part of a racial group" according to DiAngelo. She continues: "seeing ourselves as unracialized individuals, we take umbrage when generalizations are made about us as a group." And by extension, whites are even more uncomfortable discussing structural racism. Therefore, I interrogate my own white privilege as an environmental academic and go so far as calling myself racist. Not as an individual, but as part of the same system that perpetuates environmental racism.

Second, Dr. Johnson and I employed a facilitation technique developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). Its focused conversation and consensus workshop methods are designed to provide meaningful dialogue and broaden perspectives. The technique involves four kinds of prompts: Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional (ORID). They also are known as the what, gut, so what, and now what. We ask volunteers from the group to share experiential facts by responding to the question: "What experiences of environmental injustice have you, your family, or your community had?" Next, reflective question prompts (how did that make you feel) are posed and designed to elicit and acknowledge the emotions, memories, and initial associations of participants.

In the second part of the workshop, participants were organized into small groups to begin brainstorming. The following interpretive prompt was asked. "When environmental justice is being achieved, what is going on?" Interpretive questions should be designed to elicit the sharing of experiences and meanings, build shared awareness, and identify options and possibilities. Finally, we gave the small groups a decisional prompt to elicit collective opinions and resolve that may lead to future actions. We asked: "What's going on when [the environmental group] is helping achieve environmental justice. This method requires facilitators to listen intently throughout the experience and this kind of practice is excellent praxis for academics and students striving to become partners in the EJ movement. The results from this technique have been positive and I plan

on employing it in my spring graduate seminar. I've included my **PowerPoint slides** from one of these workshops in my application materials.

Recent Activities

In this final section, I'd like to share one of my most rewarding engagements for environmental justice. I've included the student journal for the **Environmental and Health Justice Leadership Program** in this application that grew out of another South Seattle community connection in March of last year. With College and Department funding, I was able to offer a four-day program in mid-August for eight Cleveland High School students. We designed the program to help them examine Seattle's patterns of privilege and oppression that led to their community's environmental injustices and organized the engagement around the following question. "Are all of Seattle's neighborhoods achieving environmental and health justice?"

We further developed three learning objectives for our students. First, participants will continue to apply an integrative approach to understanding the human and environment interactions that result in environmental and health disparities. Second, participants will produce, interpret, and apply research in a solution-oriented context. Finally, participants will work collaboratively to identify and analyze complex environmental and health injustices, recognize diverse stakeholder perspectives, and synthesize creative solutions. I think one of my colleagues summarized it nicely. "*I think most notable has been a shift in his own approach as he recently told me about involving the Cleveland students. As he put it, in his work going back to St. Louis, he was serving or bringing in the communities as part of his scholarship. Now, however, he said he is taking himself to them. I would say he is giving himself over to the community his research actually serves. This is a high model for our students to witness and partake in.*" In other words, I've moved not only all the way to the right of the community engagement spectrum, but off the chart so to speak as I'm now being empowered and my research and teaching is now driven by the community.

Thank you for readings and giving me an opportunity to connect and reflect on my decade's work engaging in the work that connects environmental justice analysis to action and begin the difficult work that interrupts and changes the oppressive social, economic, and institutional patterns that fuel environmental racism.