

Department of Environmental Studies

Graduate Handbook

2025-26

**Online Master of Professional Studies (MPS) in
Environmental Leadership, Justice and
Communication**

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Table of Contents

I. WELCOME & BACKGROUND	3
II. SUMMARY OF PROGRAM	3
III. PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES	4
IV. ADVANCED CERTIFICATES & COURSEWORK	5
<i>Advanced Graduate Certificates & Coursework (9 credits each)</i>	5
<i>Advanced Graduate Certificate in Environmental Leadership (9 credits)</i>	5
<i>Advanced Graduate Certificate in Environmental Justice & Inequality (9 credits)</i>	5
<i>Advanced Graduate Certificate in Science and Environmental Communication & Public Relations Management (9 credits)</i>	5
V. CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE/SYNTHESIS PROJECT	6
<i>Synthesis Project</i>	6
<i>Synthesis Plan</i>	6
<i>Roles and Responsibilities</i>	7
VI. ACADEMIC ADVISING	8
<i>Major Professor</i>	8
<i>Steering Committee</i>	8
<i>Student Responsibility</i>	8
<i>Program Assessment</i>	8
VII. REQUIRED FORM	8
VIII. RESOURCES	9
<i>Departmental Office</i>	9

I. Welcome & Background

Welcome to the Online Master of Professional Studies (MPS) in Environmental Leadership, Justice, and Communication (ELJC) Graduate Program. This program is offered through the Environmental Studies Department at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF). We are delighted that you have joined a unique set of graduate students, faculty, and researchers who share a deep interest in analyzing, communicating, and acting in the context of today's complex environmental issues.

The New York State Department of Education and the State University of New York establish policy for all graduate programs. At ESF, the College Faculty has adopted a comprehensive set of Graduate Policies. These are published in the College Catalog. The policies and the procedures which implement College policy are contained in the ESF Faculty Governance body's "Graduate Academic Policies" document, also available in the College Catalog. In addition, the MPS Environmental Studies program has its own policies, procedures, and guidelines as documented in this handbook.

II. Summary of Program

The Online MPS in Environmental Leadership, Justice, and Communication is a 30-credit-hour experience focused on developing analytical capacities and problem-solving skills for environmental professionals, community leaders, decision makers, and advocates. This MPS is fully online and is designed to be accessible to working professionals and other non-traditional students. The curriculum can be completed in as short as one year or over a longer period of time, depending on how many courses a student takes per semester.

To earn the MPS, students complete three stand-alone advanced graduate certificates, each composed of three 3-credit courses: in Environmental Leadership (9 credits); Environmental Justice & Inequality (9 credits), and Science and Environmental Communication (9 credits). In their final semester, students participate in a 3-credit applied capstone project oriented towards their professional and/or civic objectives.

By building the Online MPS program on a "stackable" 3 certificate model, the program offers the opportunity for students to gather a series of smaller credentials – each of value in its own right - towards earning a graduate level professional degree.

The three certificates were each designed to target a key set of skills that environmental professionals are in need of, but for which few programs targeted for these skills exist. Graduates of the Online MPS program will be well positioned to meet the growing need for professional-level capacities in leadership, decision-

making, communication, public engagement, and conflict resolution, and will gain comprehensive skills and education in addressing concerns related to environmental justice and inequality.

The Online MPS in Environmental Leadership, Justice, and Communication is geared toward working professionals and those interested in pursuing careers in the following areas:

- Government institutions as either administrators, outreach and communications staff, or on-the-ground managers who often interact with the public directly
- State Extension specialists and county agents
- Environmental consultants
- Interest group professionals (e.g., environmental NGO staff) and grass roots organizers
- Scientists and researchers
- Citizen advocacy and community leadership

III. Program Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete the Online MPS program will be able to:

1. Analyze the policy context, political and socioeconomic forces, and key stakeholders of an environmental problem or environmental decision process
2. Critically engage research and evidence on the unique environmental vulnerabilities and conflicts that marginalized communities face
3. Examine factors influencing public perceptions of science, risk, and environments
4. Develop and clarify a personal set of values, strengths, and opportunities for growth as an environmental problem-solver or change-maker
5. Facilitate environmental decision processes that integrate scientific knowledge, public values, and diverse ways of knowing
6. Design and evaluate communications, advocacy, and public engagement efforts on environmental issues
7. Apply research-informed tools and methods to address uncertainty, inequality, and conflict in environmental problem-solving

IV. Advanced Certificates & Coursework

Advanced Graduate Certificates & Coursework (9 credits each)

The Online MPS is awarded to students who earn three advanced certificates (9 credits each) and who complete a capstone project (3 credits) completed in the student's final semester. Students should consult with their advisor to determine the order in which they will take courses. In consultation with your Major Professor, substitutions for alternative, graduate-level course work that supports the Program Learning Outcomes can be considered via petition on a case-by-case basis.

Advanced Graduate Certificate in Environmental Leadership (9 credits)

Coursework:

EST 612 - Environmental Policy and Governance (3 credits, Spring)

EST 635 - Public Participation and Decision Making: Theory and Application (3 credits, Spring)

EST 640 - Environmental Thought and Ethics (3 credits, Fall)

Advanced Graduate Certificate in Environmental Justice & Inequality (9 credits)

Coursework:

EST 615 - Environmental Justice: Policy, Management and Society (3 credits, Fall)

EST 616 - Global Perspectives on Environmental Justice (3 credits, Spring)

EST 617 - Measuring Environmental Inequality (3 credits, Spring)

Advanced Graduate Certificate in Science and Environmental Communication & Public Relations Management (9 credits)

Coursework:

EST 555 - Public Relations Management for Environmental Professionals (3 credits, Spring)

EST 606 - Public Perception and the Communication of the Environment, Science and Risk (3 credits, Fall)

EST 608 - Environmental Advocacy Campaigns and Conflict Resolution Application (3 credits, Fall)

Refer to the [ESF College Catalog for current course descriptions](#) for further details.

V. Capstone Experience/Synthesis Project

As a way of synthesizing and demonstrating what they have learned in relation to the program outcomes, students will complete a capstone experience, typically in the final semester of their program. A proposal should be submitted to the Major Professor, discussed, and approved prior to the start of the capstone experience.

Synthesis Project

The purpose of the Synthesis Project is to provide ELJC MPS students an opportunity to summarize, integrate, and reflect on the coursework and other experiences in their graduate studies. The Synthesis Project is considered the culmination of the student's MPS program and includes a one-hour capstone presentation (25-30 minutes followed by Q&A) delivered in a virtual or in-person format, or the equivalent to be agreed upon with your major professor.

Some students may wish to weave their Synthesis Project together with an ongoing or newly developed Professional Experience that supports the application of Program Learning Outcomes. Although the Steering Committee will provide guidance and oversight on linking the Professional Experience to the Synthesis Project, it is the student's responsibility to find, develop, and maintain the Professional Experience, as well as to ensure that the Synthesis Project supports any professional obligations they may have.

Synthesis Projects earn 3 credit hours in the Environmental Studies Online MPS program. For Synthesis Projects not linked to a Professional Experience, the student registers for EST 798, Problems in Environmental Studies. For Synthesis Projects linked to a Professional Experience, the student registers for EST 898, Professional Experience. In both cases, the Instructor of Record will be their Major Professor.

Synthesis Plan

A Synthesis Plan provides a detailed template for the Synthesis Project. It must be completed no later than the second week of the final semester, in consultation with the student's Major Professor and Steering Committee. The Synthesis Plan includes the following:

- Description of the proposed focus of the Synthesis Project,
- Reflection on how the Synthesis Project aligns with at least two of the Program Learning Outcomes (see page 2),
- Description of how the Synthesis Project aligns with the student's professional goals,
- Proposed format (paper, website, video production, magazine, other),

- Approximate page length or other measures of student's engagement in the project, understanding that the final product should be around 20 single-space pages, or, if another format is chosen, would require a similar amount of effort,
- Timeline for completion, and
- Proposed evaluation criteria which would guide the student's Major Professor and Steering Committee member in assessing the Synthesis Project.

Roles and Responsibilities

It is the responsibility of the student to make all arrangements for the completion of the Synthesis Project requirements in a timely manner. The Major Professor and one additional Steering Committee member are responsible for approving the Synthesis Project and for overseeing the student's program, including confirming that the proposed Synthesis Project is suitable and worthwhile. They will be available for periodic consultation on the student's progress and for review of the draft Synthesis Project.

VI. Academic Advising

Major Professor

Each student in the Online MPS program will be assigned a Major Professor (advisor). Each new student should communicate with their Major Professor during the week prior to the start of classes to discuss their academic and career objectives; this will be helpful in selecting courses for the first semester. The session also will allow the Major Professor(s) and student to share their expectations for their academic relationship and establish a schedule for work on the student's Environmental Studies Online MPS Plan.

Steering Committee

Each student pursuing the Online MPS degree will have a steering committee comprised of at least two members, including at least one Faculty Member in ESF's Online MPS program. Other steering committee members may include faculty members from other institutions, or other recognized professionals. The final composition of the steering committee needs to be approved by the Major Professor. Led by the student's Major Professor, the steering committee will assist with guiding students through coursework and the capstone experience.

Student Responsibility

In addition to these aspects of advising, Major Professors will provide students with ongoing mentoring and assistance with course selection. However, the onus is on the student to understand program requirements and to research the available means of attaining them. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and for meeting program requirements.

Program Assessment

The Department of Environmental Studies is committed to ongoing assessment and improvement of all of its academic programs. Accordingly, data are collected periodically at the beginning, end, and mid-points of this and other programs, with the purpose of contributing to the evaluation of program effectiveness.

VII. Required Form

Students must complete Form 2A (Appointment of Major Professor/Steering Committee) which is available here: [Important Forms and Documents](#)

VIII. Resources

Departmental Office

The Environmental Studies Office (106 Marshall Hall) maintains unofficial student records and a collection of course syllabi that are available for reference. Time-relevant opportunities may be posted on the ES-Grad-Announce listserv or via the departmental Instagram page (ESF_Enviro_Studies).

It is not unusual for students, at some time during their studies, to encounter problems of a personal or academic nature for which they require assistance. An early full discussion of the situation and options is often the key to their resolution. Major Professors, the Departmental Graduate Studies Coordinator, and Department Chair are available to facilitate this process. The Departmental secretary can assist in making appointments as necessary.