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Connecting Streams across Campus

By Jo Yarrington, Lori Jones, and Pat Poli

As universities focus on the myriad of ways in which to serve their students and create fruitful learning environments, it's no surprise that job readiness and more streamlined educational programs have become a selling point. By contrast, universities have the opportunity to take something that may seem quite singular or unconnected to the everyday learning experience and weave this focus throughout a campus's curriculum – connecting a topic with global impact through interdisciplinary learning.

Fairfield University is committed to a learning environment for our students in which they experience interdisciplinary opportunities that value *cura personalis*. To aid this vision, the university sought an opportunity to integrate learning more actively through a comprehensive focus. The intent was to center the curiosities of both faculty and students through the exploration of particular ideas related to multicultural understanding, professional responsibility, and artistic engagement.

For the last two academic years, Fairfield has been committed to the theme “Water.” The third university theme over the past six years, “Water” was selected because of its impact both globally and on our everyday existence – as

a referencing of the deep and unruly terrain between psychological spaces and physical places. Pat Poli, associate professor of accounting, was drawn because she teaches a course about NGO operations in which many of the cases

and readings involve water: its scarcity, the need for clean water, and the struggles of the poor to obtain water. And Lori Jones, director of programming and audience development for Fairfield's main theater

Water 2014-16 Focus

an element, a force to be moved and shaped, bought and sold, feared for its power, revered for its absolute necessity for life, lamented for its changing composition, and explored in its entirety to better understand the need for global stewardship.

For Jo Yarrington, professor of studio art, the notion of water is a central component of her creative accomplishments: it is a metaphor,

venue, wanted to contribute to a project that served the university's mission and dedication to social justice and encouraged campuswide engagement.

Together, this group formed the executive committee overseeing the water theme and worked with interdisciplinary partners to establish initiatives across a variety of fronts on campus: films, lectures, art exhibitions, activist projects,

water-themed courses, field trips, and community conversations. Provost Lynn Babington generously supported the effort by charging vice presidents and deans to devote various working budgets to the theme. Some of these programs have included:

- A curricular sequence of classes was offered to students participating in the theme by taking water-related courses and attending events and lectures. An interdisciplinary research seminar was also offered each spring where participating students worked with a mentor in their field of study to guide the research and with Jo Yarring-

ton, who incorporated their study of water.

- The “Water Wall,” located in the heart of campus, was covered with chalkboard paint so that all members of the university community could post water ruminations, facts, and questions.
- Aluminum water bottles were given to the incoming class of 2019 at orientation – challenging students to use them as a sign of solidarity and commitment to environmentally sustainable practices throughout their four years at Fairfield.
- Core English classes assigned first-year students to read and

write essays reflective of water. In the service of *eloquentia perfecta*, first-year students further explored the theme from the perspectives of responsible literary, intellectual, and civic engagement by hosting the water-themed “National Day on Writing,” showing they can make a contribution to the learning community at Fairfield from day one.

- Finally, illustrating a variety of approaches to the theme, an interdisciplinary water film series was structured so that each film explored a different aspect of water with an introduction by two Fairfield faculty members



Senior, Art and Communications major, Abigail Abrams, for the ID 395 Water Theme Seminar. Water Research Project: Keystone Pipe Line. Water color and India Ink on Rives BFK paper. Installation in the Experimental Space Gallery.

from different disciplines preceding the film and a guided Q&A afterward.

How was all this accomplished, especially in a small university with a multitude of different interests and priorities? Of importance is the university's vision to provide an integrated liberal arts program for students. The theme's activities deliver an example of this interdisciplinary

dent leadership positions were developed to spearhead the "Water" focus to build stronger student engagement in the university theme. The steering committee exhibited a passion and commitment to the success of "Water" and made excellent recommendations that enabled the more focused planning by the executive committee. Repeated and ongoing publicity also played a key role in establishing

other events happening daily. However, by breaking down assumed institutional silos and opening lines of communication across campus, we were able to better coordinate and partner with other events – offering students a diverse range of learning experiences and faculty the opportunity to engage outside of their programs. Many individual, unsolicited testimonies from students and faculty spoke to the power and benefit of providing a universitywide focus.

There is no denying water's impact on all of us on a global scale and yet it is so easily taken for granted. The impact of focusing on a universitywide theme encouraged students, faculty, staff, and the broader Fairfield community to reflect on their personal experiences, studies, and appreciation for this incredible resource. We hope Fairfield University's theme creates a "ripple" effect that pushes out and encourages a yearning to learn more and make a difference – whether through a student's research, a faculty member's commitment to helping students understand their impact on a vital source of life and commerce, or through a community member dedicating time to help keep our water clean.



Two separate installations in the Experiment Space gallery, studio art program, Loyola Hall, Fairfield University. Top view: student work in a water focused course exhibition, Exposing Water, Digital Photography. Bottom view: Fair Weather: The Wetland Project with artist Mary Mattingly.

learning both to the university and broader communities in the town of Fairfield.

From the beginning, it was determined that the success of the theme would require staff support, adjunct consultants, student representation, faculty commitment, and coordination with the provost's office, vice presidents, and deans. In addition, four stu-

larger audiences with reminders shared by print and digital resources to promote specific "Water" programs and series.

Of course, there are challenges. In particular, the university is a robust and active campus with living and learning communities and residential colleges with curricular requirements, multiple film series, and many

The overview was written collaboratively by Jo Yarrington, theme facilitator and professor of studio art in the department of visual and performing arts; Lori Jones, director of programming and audience development at the Quick Center for the Arts; and Pat Poli, associate professor of accounting in the Dolan School of Business.