

**Ecocomposition and Environmental Literatures Service-Learning**

**Bradley University, Peoria, IL**

**Final Report  
July 2003**

**submitted by:  
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**Introduction**

This project involved the incorporation of environmental restoration work into the English Department's newly developed freshman seminar that combines our Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literatures courses around predetermined themes. Dr. Susan Brill de Ramírez, Associate Professor of English, offered an environmentally oriented year-long six credit hour course during the academic year Fall 2002 - Spring 2003. This class was entitled "Ecocomposition and Environmental Literatures."

The Natural Heritage Division's Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund provided the necessary monies for student service-learning opportunities. In addition to reading about various environmental concerns, the students were able to experience regional land conservation activities through hands-on restoration work. As the students reflected on these activities in their own writing, their learning about conservation was that much more deepened and their commitments to the protection of Illinois habitats were accordingly strengthened. The ILDNR grant funded the purchase of restoration equipment, as well as a camera to document the students' activities and one pair of binoculars for student viewing of wildlife during their restoration outings.

**Materials and Methods**

Purchased tools for the students' restoration work included:

- small and large bow saws
- lopping shears
- work gloves
- camera
- binoculars
- storage container for tools

Students used these tools for the restoration of protected lands along the Illinois River valley bluffs. The students cut brush, removed invasive species, assisted with erosion control, and participated in controlled burn activities.

**Results**

Bradley University Freshmen enrolled in Dr. Brill de Ramírez's "Ecocomposition and Environmental Literatures" course participated in restoration activities in the Peoria area at

Detweiller Park, Singing Woods, and the protected acreage at Springdale Cemetery. Due to inclement weather in the Spring, most of the student work took place in the Fall, including removal of invasive species and lots of brush clearing at Detweiller.

Dr. Brill de Ramírez presented the work done by the students and funded by the Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund grant at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment National Conference held at Boston University in June 3002. At this conference, Dr. Brill de Ramírez presented one paper on the development and implementation of her combined ecocomposition and environmental literatures course; this was offered at a session on ecopedagogies chaired by Dr. Brill de Ramírez. Additionally, I was invited to speak on a roundtable discussion specifically about the service-learning activities in my Ecocomposition and Environmental Literatures” course.

### **Discussion**

The course was offered to students at Freshman Orientation sessions as a year long course fulfilling both the requirements for ENG 101 and ENG 115. In tune with the environmental theme, the majority of students who signed up for the course tended to either be biology/other science majors or students with strong interests in the environment. For a year long thematically driven course, it is important that the students are strongly interested in the course material.

Definite successes of the course include the fact that the vast majority of the students (mainly biology majors) who did not come into the class with necessarily strong writing skills nor great interest in literature have been able to make strong personal connections to a range of literatures and to their own essay writing to the extent that each student has been able to produce at least one paper in the “A” range this Spring semester. The fact that the majority of the students are very interested in the literary topics has made it easier for them to appreciate the assigned readings. Also, many of the students have been able to bring what they are learning in their science classes into our class discussions, reaffirming what they are reading and, thereby, deepening their understandings of the material.

Finally, the conjunction of experiential learning in the form of various field trips, service learning in their off-campus prairie and woodlands restoration work, and cooperative learning in the seminar format and teamwork assignments has increased these students’ commitment as active community members of Bradley University and central Illinois. Many of the students have been motivated to levels of community activity beyond the fifteen hour service component each semester, including several who chose service oriented spring breaks, three who have become Assistant Residence Hall Advisors, one who is a Student Senate member and, who as a freshman, chaired the Senate subcommittee on the environment, over a half dozen who became centrally involved in the campus Student Environment Action Coalition (three who are current officers in that organization), and three who approached me for recommendations for environmentally oriented summer internships. Such student connectivity would not have been possible were it not for the funded restoration equipment made available for these students (and future students) by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund grant.

## Summary

Of central importance to this project is its primary pedagogical benefit insofar as student learning is concerned with students gaining hands-on conservation experience and thereby deepening their knowledge of and commitment to Illinois habitat restoration. Additional benefits included:

- the actual land management benefits of the students' Illinois River Valley bluffs restoration work that extended throughout the 2002-2003 school year;
- future opportunities for ongoing environmental service learning activities for Bradley University ecocomposition and environmental literatures students into the future through the purchase of the needed tools;
- and local, regional, and national publicity about Illinois wildlife preservation and land stewardship through the Bradley students' ongoing activities during the upcoming school year and during subsequent years with future students.

This work could not have been accomplished without the assistance of the ILDNR Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund grant that enabled the purchase of the needed restoration equipment for the Bradley University students' restoration activities.

## Slides/Photos

Please note that no photos accompany this report. I had planned to photograph the student restoration work in the Spring 2003 so that the image would show some of the Springtime results of the student work (e.g., new wildflowers, grasses, etc.). Due to the unusually cold Spring, the students were not able to do their Spring restoration work; the majority of their restoration activities occurred during the Fall semester when I was not yet taking photos.

With the funded camera, I will photograph future student work, and any subsequent publicity of that work will include mention to the effect that the student equipment was funded by the ILDNR Wildlife Preservation Fund.

## Publications and Presentations

Prior to the funded grant period 2002-2003, an article appeared in Track & Trails (newsletter of the Forest Park Nature Center) about Bradley University student restoration work. At that time, the student work relied upon tools provided by Peoria Wilds stewards.

Two formal presentations about the student work were made at the national meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment at Boston University in Jun 2003. During both presentations, the audience was informed that the student restoration work was funded by the ILDNR grant that financed the procurement of the needed restoration equipment.

Although the Tracks & Trails article appeared prior to the granting period, I append that for your information. Future such publicity about student restoration in the Peoria area will include acknowledgment of the ILDNR Natural Heritage Division Wildlife Preservation funding.