

BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE NEBRASKA STATE COLLEGES

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AND ACTION\ACADEMIC AND PERSONNEL

ACTION: Approve Naming Request for an Endowed Distinguished Chair Position for Peru State College

Peru State College is requesting the naming of an Endowed Distinguished Chair Position for an individual that has provided funding for the development of a program in Environmental Management, Policy and Sustainability.

The System Office and Peru State College recommend approval of the Naming Request for an Endowed Distinguished Chair Position for Peru State College.

ATTACHMENTS:

- [PSC Wheeler Proposal](#) (PDF)

Peru State College

**Al Wheeler, Jr.
Distinguished Chair in Environmental Management,
Policy, and Sustainability**

Proposal

With a generous gift from Dr. Al Wheeler, Jr., Peru State College seeks to create an endowment to support a faculty chair named for Dr. Wheeler. The inaugural holder of the Wheeler Distinguished Chair will be asked to develop and propose a new degree program in Environmental Management, Policy, and Sustainability, within Natural Science.

Environmental Management, Policy, and Sustainability Degree Program

In the summer of 2022, Dr. Al Wheeler, Jr., approached Peru State College with the idea of creating a degree program that would prepare students to help businesses, farms, cities and towns, and other entities meet their long-term goals by bringing an environmental perspective into their planning processes. The full array of terms in the title — “Environmental Management, Policy, and Sustainability” — is intended to reflect the breadth of inquiry that may be pursued by students in this program. Students may focus on the effective use of natural resources, the development of sound, data-driven policies that support sustainable growth, or a wide range of other topics that unite the interests of the Earth and the interests of the people who live here.

No programs with the full title “Environmental Management, Policy, and Sustainability” exist in Nebraska. Creighton University and Bellevue University offer the only undergraduate programs in Environmental Sustainability in Nebraska. (UNO offers a Sustainability concentration within their Bachelor’s in Multidisciplinary Studies.) The Peru State proposed program will take a broad view that includes the lenses of policy and management, making it the only institution in Nebraska with such an approach and the only public institution in Nebraska to offer an undergraduate major that focuses on Environmental Sustainability. The College’s low tuition and welcoming admissions policies will make this pathway available to significant new populations of students.

An EMPS degree will prepare students to work in business, government, education, or related fields, all with an eye toward developing solutions to environmental problems that work in the real world. One website described the value of sustainability degrees this way:

“Consumers, organizations, and businesses across all types of industries have put an unprecedented focus on becoming more sustainable. Many have already laid out substantial plans with ambitious goals. But, for all of these entities to successfully achieve all of their sustainability goals, they need the leadership of qualified sustainability experts. So, in recent years, colleges and universities across the United States have put a tremendous focus on growing their sustainability departments....

Sustainability degree holders have the opportunity to work at some of the world’s largest companies as sustainability officers and directors in charge of creating and deploying corporate sustainability policies. Google and Amazon, for example, recently established ambitious sustainability plans. They will presumably continue to need sustainability experts to ensure smooth transitions of their operations to sustainability. And so will other entities.

But those aren’t the only careers available for sustainability grads. Their cross-discipline training qualifies them for many other positions.”

Currently, the number of Nebraskans employed in this field is relatively small; the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists 340 Nebraskans employed under the category of “environmental scientists and specialists.” Nationally, more than 87,000 jobs are available in this field, and the BLS projects about 9,400 openings each year (new positions and replacements); they project 7,300 new jobs to be added between 2020 and 2030, representing a five- to eight-percent growth for the decade. The median pay nationally is \$76,530, and the mean pay in Nebraska is \$65,640. It is clear this is a strong and growing field, and it aligns well with the values and ideals held by many college students today. With the right marketing, this program will be very attractive to prospective students.

Distinguished Chair

The Al Wheeler, Jr., Distinguished Chair in Environmental Management, Policy, and Sustainability will use an existing faculty line at Peru State College, augmented by the endowment income from Dr. Wheeler’s generous gift. The endowment proceeds may be used in several ways:

- Research/travel funds, for the holder of the chair and/or students in the EMPS program
- Funds to support taking elementary-school students into the field for exploration and inspiration
 - A speaker series
 - Course releases, to reduce the teaching load
 - Town halls, business forums, internships, etc.
 - Other uses that benefit students in the EMPS program.

When the College announces this new Chair, it will roll out a communications and outreach plan that encourages people to contribute to the endowment fund. As the fund grows, the College will use the endowment proceeds to further extend the initiatives listed above, with the ultimate goal of supporting this Chair entirely from the endowment proceeds.

“Earth and its Biodiversity” Course

Another key component stemming from Dr. Wheeler’s gift will be a new course titled “Earth and its Biodiversity.” This course will be required for students in the EMPS program and will be a general-education “science” option for all other Peru State students. The course will have a related, three-hour lab that includes field experiences in local natural environments—perhaps including Missouri River mud flats, local lakes and streams, prairie environments, Nature Conservancy sites, and others—as well as such managed environments as the Peru State campus, local golf courses, nurseries, garden centers, and the like.

This course will be taught by the Wheeler Distinguished Chair whenever possible.

In addition, the holder of the Distinguished Chair will be encouraged to develop an optional two- or three-week research experience at a biological field station, perhaps UNL’s Cedar Point Biological Station or similar.

Responsibilities

The Wheeler Distinguished Chair will be expected to:

- create and propose an EMPS program for Board of Trustees consideration,
- teach a normal load in the EMPS program at Peru State College,
- teach as many sections of “Earth and its Biodiversity” as feasible,
- create and lead significant student-engagement experiences related to the EMPS program,
- fulfill all other duties of Peru State College faculty.

Note: This Distinguished Chair position is distinct from a traditional Department Chair position. The expectations of the Wheeler Distinguished Chair do not include leading a faculty department, evaluating faculty members, or performing related administrative tasks similar to other Department Chair positions across the Nebraska State Colleges.