Where are Ethics?
Understanding the Landscape of Ethics in Environmental and Sustainability Programs in Higher Education across the U.S.

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About the Project Team

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About Us

The Aldo Leopold Foundation was founded in 1982 by the children of Aldo and Estella Leopold in Baraboo, WI. As a nonprofit conservation organization, the foundation works to inspire an ethical, caring relationship between people and nature through Leopold’s legacy. Leopold believed his idea of a “land ethic” should not be static, but continually evolve in the minds of a thinking community.

The work of the foundation is grounded in Leopold’s legacy as a practitioner, a teacher, and a thinker. Stewardship and care for the Leopold Shack and Farm, a National Historic Landmark, and the lands surrounding it demonstrate a land ethic in action. The iconic site and its contemporary, the Leopold Center, inspire visitors from around the world to connect with nature and deepen their personal land ethic. And an immersive fellowship program instills a land ethic in young conservation professionals.

These programs catalyze both responsible action and dialogue, informing and inspiring people and communities to explore, learn, and apply a land ethic in myriad ways and are made possible thanks to the generosity of individuals, foundations, and corporations.

Fostering a land ethic is an effort that transpires on many levels and includes many people. Committed leadership is needed in communities, classrooms, and organizations everywhere to truly awaken an ecological conscience in society.

For more information about the Leopold Foundation’s mission and projects visit www.aldoleopold.org
About this Project

With increasingly complex environmental challenges facing communities across the globe, technical expertise must be supported by ethical foundations in order to foresee and understand the implications of our actions.

This project aims to:

- learn how ethics content is included in environmental and sustainability (ES) higher education programs,
- understand the role of Aldo Leopold and the use of his work in these programs, and
- identify the types of resources needed to support ethics inclusion in curricula.

To gain this insight, a survey was developed and distributed to educators via direct invitations and email listserves. Nearly 300 educators responded. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, or simply the Carnegie Classification, is the framework for classifying colleges and universities in the United States. Based on this classification, the survey was found to be representative of all U.S. environmental and sustainability programs according to the 2016 National Council for Science and the Environment (NCSE) census.

The intent of this project was to explore the state of environmental ethics inclusion in college classes and curricula and discover if a need or desire for resources and curriculum support around environmental ethics exists.

For a complete breakdown of the data, the methodology, and for a detailed profile of the respondents, go to the full report.
Findings

The Aldo Leopold Foundation recognizes ethics as foundational to the conservation movement. This study reveals a strong level of agreement among participants. However, there is a significant gap between the level of importance for individual faculty and the delivery efficacy of ethics content in their respective environmental studies/sciences, and sustainability programs. This report summarizes these data, identifies some examples of how to address the gap, and invites input on ways to ensure all graduates of environmental studies, sciences, and sustainability programs across the country are exposed to ethics content.

Ethical Context, Implication, & Inclusion in Curricula

When asked, 92% of survey respondents agreed that practice in the fields of environment and sustainability has ethical implications.

However, only 24% of respondents believe their programs are currently covering ethics content very effectively, leaving a majority (76%) believing they could be more effective. Therefore, despite being deemed as important by educators, ethics is currently not being addressed as effectively as respondents desired.

How important is ethics content in your course or curriculum, and how well do you feel the ethics content is being delivered?
Ethics-related Learning Outcomes

One reason for the disconnect between importance and effectiveness might be the importance placed on ethics by departments or programs. Despite the fact that 92% of faculty place an importance on ethics individually, only 57% of respondents say their programs place a high importance on ethics.

This perceived lack of importance placed on ethics at the program level is illustrated by the limited inclusion of ethics-related learning outcomes (LOs) in programs. Only 50% of respondents reported their programs have defined learning outcomes focused on ethics. The existence of learning outcomes often substantiates the importance of certain content and sets goals for an institution to prioritize relevant content, in this case ethics education.

What Learning Outcomes does your program have related to ethics?
Challenges in Teaching Ethics

Within the survey, respondents identified several pedagogical challenges which make teaching environmental ethics difficult. Indeed, having a lack of defined learning outcomes was identified as a challenge by 37% of respondents. The most common pedagogical challenge identified by respondents was that students struggle with ambiguity (61%). As for the other options within the survey, nearly half of respondents identified a lack of relevant evaluation tools (47%), and almost a third said they lacked effective teaching materials (30%).

Nearly half of the survey respondents (49%) commented on the sociopolitical environment at their institution in an open-ended survey question. A majority indicated the sociopolitical environment was supportive (65%), but many also reported constraints (42%). The most commonly reported constraint was societal political polarization. Another frequently mentioned constraint was the view of including ethics in science education and a lack of preparation by science faculty on how to include ethics in science courses.

Does your program and/or departments share any of these challenges? If so, what are strategies to overcome them and pave the way for greater ethics inclusion?

Inclusion of Aldo Leopold

Content related to Aldo Leopold, a prominent historical figure whose work connects the importance of ethics with the field of conservation, can provide an opportunity for students to be exposed to environmental ethics.

Within programs, 71% of respondents report that their programs incorporate Aldo Leopold content. However, while 71% of programs use Aldo Leopold content in their classes, 77% of those respondents indicated that individually they spend very little or only some time on this content, and only 12% mention they spend quite a bit to a great deal of time on this content.

What other contemporary or historic conservation voices do you use to expose your students to the ethical dimensions of conservation?
While the results of this survey show that administrators and faculty in environment and sustainability-focused programs in higher education believe in the importance of environmental ethics education, a significant gap exists between the importance placed on ethics by individual faculty and in the effectiveness of current ethics instruction. This gap could be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the importance placed on ethics by programs, lack of defined learning outcomes, and the pedagogical and sociopolitical challenges identified by respondents.

The Aldo Leopold Foundation is interested in both ensuring there is specific Leopold related content in collegiate classes and curricula, but also that ethics content, more broadly and deeply defined, are included in the educational experience of our future conservation leaders. Moving onward, the Aldo Leopold Foundation looks forward...
to offering assistance and resources, and importantly, continuing to gather your input to ensure students graduating from environmental studies, sciences, and sustainability programs obtain the ethics education necessary to navigate our current and future environmental challenges.

**Potential Resources**

A third or more of respondents indicated seven potential land-ethic related resources as beneficial to increasing the effectiveness of ethics education:

- case studies demonstrating application of a land ethic (68%),
- curricular modules and/or materials (54%),
- recommendations on relevant and/or contemporary related writings (44%),
- interpretive essays (44%),
- discounted copies of *A Sand County Almanac* or essays (42%),
- digital guest lectures by Leopold experts (39%), and
- training or support in discussing environmental ethics and/or values (35%).

**Help Improve Ethics Education in the Field**

- Stay connected with The Aldo Leopold Foundation! [Sign-up for the email newsletter](#) for more resources and ways to contribute as the work progresses.
- Require *A Sand County Almanac* for your next course. Information on the educational discounts available can be found online at [www.aldoleopold.org/educational-almanac](http://www.aldoleopold.org/educational-almanac).
- Work with your department to identify ethics as a priority and develop defined learning outcomes.
- Share your experiences in elevating and including ethics content in your classes and programs.

We look forward to using the information gathered in this report, as well as from your continued feedback, to work together to increase the inclusion of ethics in environmental studies, sciences, and sustainability programs.

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This report was distilled from original data gathered by the distributed survey. To view the entire data breakdown with further analysis, please view our full report.

With questions, please contact Alanna Koshkollek, Evaluation Coordinator at alanna@aldoleopold.org.

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**Bibliography**