

State of the EES Department (in the COVID-19 Era)

We're still here! It has been a tumultuous year or so, and we apologize for the delay in producing and sending you our annual Newsletter (the last one was sent in December, 2018). Watch for a new Newsletter over the winter break, possibly online-only.

First, on behalf of the EES faculty, staff, and students, I hope that all of you in the extended EES community, and your family and other loved ones, are safe and well and have found it possible to navigate this incredibly complicated and difficult time. Certainly, we didn't expect and weren't particularly prepared for the COVID-19 virus — one thing we discovered is that, in the face of crisis and complexity, EES pulls together to identify creative, interesting solutions to serve not only EES but also the broader university community and endeavors (see the graphic below). After the virus-related shutdown, we did our best to provide a meaningful 2020 spring semester, in particular for our graduating seniors. In exit interviews, they conveyed an extremely positive perspective on their years in the department and their preparation for the future. They were incredibly gracious presenting their research results to us via Zoom, not in the usual room 101 venue with posters hung in the beautiful A-wing atrium. Our futures are in good hands.

In our abrupt exit from campus in March, and over the last months, we've been reminded of the value and stimulation of interacting with our undergraduate and graduate students, in-person, and also the enjoyment we get out of interacting day-to-day as a group of faculty and staff with a common mission. Although the Fall, 2020, will be quite complicated, we hope for some limited interaction in the hallways and labs, perhaps on some very carefully administered field trips.

Here is a brief synopsis of our experiences and activities since Spring, 2019:

It was a complicated 2018-2019 academic year, with the university beginning to make some financial cutbacks (including in staffing) and undertaking large projects you no doubt have heard about: a planned increase in the number of undergraduate students, the creation of the College of Health (currently housed in the STEPS building), and the related hiring of up to 100 new faculty. Also underway were several major building projects, including several new dormitories and the construction of the Health, Science, and Technology (HST) Building.

Our dear friend Nancy Roman retired in August, 2019, after a nearly 40-year career at Lehigh University, working nearly entirely in our department and in both Williams Hall and the STEPS Building. Of course, we have missed her calm approach to managing difficult situations and we wish her the very best in her retirement. In October, 2019, Libby Seyfried began as the EES Business Manager and, thanks to her skills, we didn't miss a beat. Since becoming Chair in July, 2019, I have greatly enjoyed working with Libby and with Andrea Goff, as the incredible array of unexpected events crossed our desks.

Richard B. Palmer, a Lehigh University alumnus and long-time friend of EES and its predecessor Geological Sciences passed away in mid-March, 2020. Richard had long ago provided an extremely valuable endowment that supports graduate students conducting field-based studies and also departmental field trips. We thank his family for continuing to support our mission to give students experiences examining rocks in their natural settings, not in museum drawers.

We were banned from entry into the STEPS building as of midnight on March 20, 2020 – all undergraduate students had by then been sent home. We spent the following month or so rapidly transitioning to remote-only delivery of our courses. The summer brought many new challenges, including our slow re-entry into the STEPS building to pursue research, beginning in late June. Great effort was spent developing elaborate COVID-19 safety protocol documentation for every laboratory space and, slowly, we all got back to work in the labs. We began stocking up on PPEs to allow safe operations, preparing for what we suspected would be a strange fall semester. Like most of you, we worked from home, peering for many hours into our laptop screens.

In June this year, we lost one of our old friends and faculty colleagues, Paul B. (P.B.) Myers, whom we hadn't seen in a year or two because of his declining health (more will be provided in the in-preparation EES Newsletter). P.B. imparted some real calm and humor to the department that many times helped guide us through difficult times. We will continue to award the annual P.B. Myers Best T.A. Award each spring at our Annual Departmental Picnic.

Later in the summer, we received news that Dr. Lawrence (Larry) Taylor (Lehigh Ph.D. 1968), who passed away in 2017, and his wife Dawn had planned to fund a new endowment for EES to support graduate students working the areas of geochemistry and planetary geology. We thank Dawn for her kindness and generosity working with Lehigh's Development Office — this endowment, now fully in place, will provide a summer support package for one of our graduate students each year.

This fall, we are in a mostly-remote instructional mode, with very few EES folks in the STEPS building at any one time. Our seminar series is being run in virtual-only mode, as are graduate student committee meetings and defenses – the Donnel Foster Hewett Symposium has been postponed until the spring, when we hope to be allowed to have more in-person events. Only six of our courses this semester have an in-person component. This has required faculty to make heroic adaptations both to ensure student safety and to meet the needs of the remote learners in the classes (thanks to Dave Anastasio, Frank Pazzaglia, Bob Booth, Ben Felzer, Steve Peters, and Joan Ramage).

Some final comments: As always, our undergraduate students amaze us with the level of intellectual curiosity and energy they put into both coursework and the often quite sophisticated research they undertake. Our graduate students continue to be the glue that holds the department together, keeping us focused on our mission to advance intellectual discovery. In times of uncertainty such as this, the donations and other support from you all in the extended EES community make all we do possible – each year, we receive only about one-third of what we spend in the form of operating budget from the University and College. These endowed funds and other donations allow us to support meaningful undergraduate and graduate research, with field areas around the globe, send our students to professional meetings, recruit and support several graduate students each year, and sponsor our seminar series and research symposia that connect with colleagues and broaden our perspectives. These funds also sponsor pilot studies by our faculty, provide a weekly departmental lunch, and yes, provide us with coffee and cookies! Thank you all very, very much — please stay in touch.

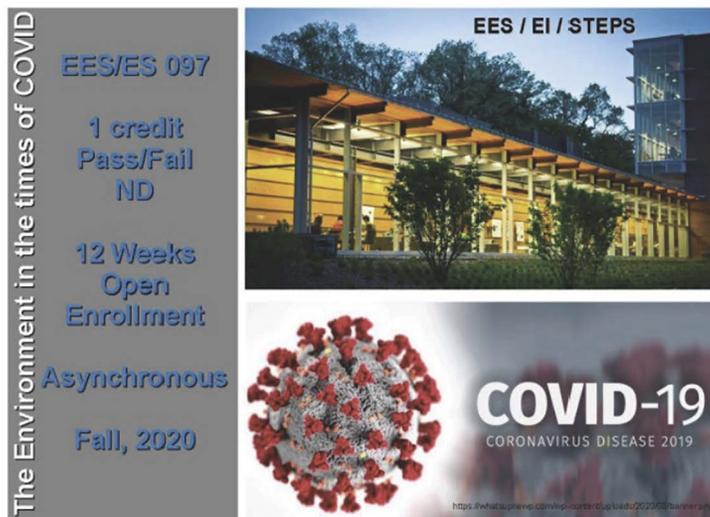
Sincerely,



Gray E. Bebout, Professor and Chair

Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences

To stay in touch: Please send your updated e-mail address, (snail) mailing address and phone number (it's best to send this information to Andrea at ahq212@lehigh.edu). **Let us know what you've been up to!**



ABOVE: EES/ES 097, coordinated by Frank Pazzaglia, Joan Ramage, and Don Morris (but with many contributors)