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Title: Modular, scaffolded semester projects: less stress, more learning

My courses' semester project designs support my goals of engagement, absorption, and application, as well as my teaching philosophy of "energy and sustainability learning for all, from all." All of my courses feature scaffolded, modular semester projects that utilize guided inquiry. These semester projects consist of several interim assignments that build on one another. I provide feedback on each assignment, which I return in time for my students to review it before submitting the next component. At the end of the semester, students in each of my courses combine these project modules into one semester project, addressing all of the feedback they received throughout the semester from me and their peers.

The modular format enables my students to apply and integrate their learning as it happening, incorporating new concepts, course readings, discussion points, knowledge, and skills as we cover them in course readings, discussions, and other activities. This format and my feedback encourage them to reflect on their learning in an ongoing way. Course evaluations have confirmed that my students value this opportunity to reflect as they research and write, and I space the interim assignments several weeks apart to provide time for this reflection.

The project model I designed for Energy Policy more than a decade ago, which I then incorporated in my design of Food-Energy-Water-Climate Nexus, enables my students to find unique, personal connections to the course concepts. For their semester project, they can choose any place or organization in the world at any scale – city/town, state, region, nation, or organization – to analyze. Some students have chosen based on their roots. Other students have selected to research a place where they would like to live someday. Others have chosen their project locations thematically, choosing places that intrigued them based on readings for my courses or others, our discussions of video case studies, or news articles they've read. The individual connections the students make with these places and their energy policy or nexus paths have helped some students to define their academic and/or career trajectories.

I tell my students to think of these projects as research and writing samples for job applications, or as foundations for journal articles. I encourage them to view these projects as opportunities to create narratives that help others to understand the policies, challenges, and solutions in the place they have chosen for their case study. I tell my students that they are the experts on the place they have chosen. In these ways, their

projects become platforms for their active leadership in “energy and sustainability learning for all, from all.” Some students have used their projects to secure jobs, and others have presented their projects at conferences.

Concurrently, these assignments help me to grow as an instructor. I consider my students’ questions and their responses to my assignment feedback as I revise my course syllabi, assignment guidelines, and feedback approaches every semester. This reflection and revision contribute to my evolving ability to support my students’ learning and career goals.