The Committee on the History of Technology and Environment at the University of Virginia

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In 1997-1998, the University of Virginia launched a new effort to promote collaboration. Convinced that bringing together scholars and students from across the university would enhance teaching and research, the provost's office, deans of three schools, and a private donor funded a Committee on the History of Technology and Environment. This paper describes the genesis, activities, and plans for the committee.[1]

By the mid-1990s, several schools at the University of Virginia had hired scholars with interests in the history of technology and the environment. Most of those scholars held appointments in Engineering and Applied Science, Arts and Sciences, or Architecture. Some of those faculty members had collaborated with colleagues in other departments, e.g. by teaching courses and advising students. But, in an era of tight resources, there was no room to lessen departmental responsibilities in exchange for work done for other departments. Collaboration came as an overload, and students had limited chances to take courses not offered by their own school. Was there a better way?

Around 1996, several faculty members began looking. We wanted to enhance teaching and research by organizing the university's wide but scattered expertise, and we wanted to minimize the administrative apparatus required to do so.

In the end, we decided to propose the creation of a Committee on the History of Technology and the Environment. The committee would hire a postdoctoral fellow to take over some departmental teaching responsibilities. Committee members would cross list new and existing undergraduate and graduate courses to make them accessible to students from all schools. Those courses would form the core of new undergraduate minors and a graduate field (or fields). The committee would sponsor a seminar series to bring in scholars from outside the university.

We thought this plan made intellectual and practical sense, and we thought it might attract outside funding in the long run. In the short run, we needed start up funds.

We proposed this plan to chairs of our departments. With their support, we approached the Associate Dean for Research of the School of Engineering and Applied Science. He encouraged us to contact the Vice Provost for Research, who had a keen interest in, and budget for, promoting school-wide initiatives. The Vice Provost promised about a fourth of the funding needed for the program for the first three years. He urged us to ask the Deans of Engineering and Applied Science, Arts and Sciences, and Architecture to match his contribution. We did, and they did. The Vice Provost also obtained funds from an outside donor to support the seminar series. Total funding came to about $150,000 for the first three years.

In early 1997, we hired a Postdoctoral Fellow. We advertised the job nationally, received applications from outstanding candidates, conducted interviews at a history convention and on

campus, and selected a recent Ph.D. who had written a dissertation on the impact of technology on views of the environment.[2]

The 1997-1998 school year saw an array of new opportunities for students and faculty. We offered the first two courses cross listed under the auspices of the committee: American Environmental History and Nature and Technology in America.[3] High student demand suggested that our theme appealed to students as well as to faculty. We joined with technical faculty in the School of Engineering and Applied to plan a new minor in technology and environment.[4] The minor featured several tracks, including one called "history." During fall term, seminar speakers discussed the role of engineering in American imperialism and the past and future of the electric car.[5] As of this writing (January 1998), we expected to bring in an environmental historian, a historian of technology, and a leader from industry to present seminars during spring term. Looking ahead, we expected to offer graduate and undergraduate courses future years, continue to bring in outside speakers, and push ahead on undergraduate minors and graduate fields.

The committee is still in its infancy, and a lot of work remains to be done. But even at this early date, we take pride in having raised the funds to undertake this venture in university-wide collaboration, and we have been delighted by the enthusiasm it has generated among students, administrators, and faculty.

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[1]Committee members included Brian Balogh (History), Daniel Bluestone (Architectural History), John Brown (Technology, Culture, and Communication), W. Bernard Carlson (Technology, Culture and Communication and Committee Chair), Edmund Russell (Technology, Culture, and Communication), and Olivier Zunz (History). Key supporters included Gene Block (Vice Provost for Research), Dennis Kernahan (Donor), Richard Miksad (Dean of Engineering and Applied Science), William McDonough (Dean of Architecture), Ray Nelson (Dean of Arts and Sciences), Peter Onuf (Chair, History), Ingrid Soudek (Chair, Technology, Culture, and Communication), and Haydn Wadley (Associate Dean for Research, School of Engineering and Applied Science).

[2]We chose Paul Sutter, Ph.D. with honors from the University of Kansas, as the postdoctoral fellow. Dr. Sutter's dissertation discussed the impact of automobiles on the wilderness preservation movement.

[3]Both were undergraduate courses cross listed in Engineering and Applied Science, Arts and Sciences, and Architecture. I taught American Environmental History fall term, and Paul Sutter spring term. W. Bernard Carlson taught Nature and Technology in America. To meet School of Engineering and Applied Science requirements for writing and public speaking, American Environmental History capped enrollment at 30; Nature and Technology in America, a large lecture course, featured discussion sections reserved for engineering students.

[4]Collaborators included Taylor Beard (Mechanical, Aerospace, and Nuclear Engineering), Teresa Culver (Civil Engineering), Roseanne Ford (Chemical Engineering), and Paxton Marshall (Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs).

[5]Michael Adas (Rutgers) discussed the former and David Kirsch (UCLA) the latter.