The University of West Florida (UWF) Department of Environmental Studies provides students with an opportunity to pursue two tracks toward a BS in Environmental Science (Natural Science and Environmental Management) as well as a MS degree in Environmental Science that can be obtained via a thesis or non-thesis program of study. The program is established to provide a scientific basis for a broad range of environmental sciences, including hydrology, soil science, and climatology, while also providing limited exposure to policy applications of the environmental studies via courses such as Land-Use Management, Environmental Impact Assessment, and Environmental Aspects of Urban Growth. These latter “applications” courses are largely limited to the Environmental Management track of the program, which also requires a course in Environmental Economics.

The cornerstone/gateway courses into the programs are Physical Geography and Physical Geology; each student takes only one of those gateway courses and a plurality of majors enter the program via Physical Geography. Both the curriculum and the focus of the program reflect the fact that it was traditionally populated by faculty with a (Physical) Geography background. Currently five of six faculty have such a background, though it is worth noting that the current chair (and author of this summary), who was named chair less than two years ago, has a background in Geology and Oceanography. UWF Environmental Studies is definitely not a Geology program and offers no courses in a traditional Geology curriculum (e.g., Stratigraphy and Sedimentology, Mineralogy, Structural Geology, etc.).

Geographic Information Science (GIS) is an important component of the program; all students are required to complete a sequence of courses starting with Cartographic Skills, followed by Photo Interpretation and Remote Sensing, and culminating with Introduction to Geographic Information Science; students may elect to complete an additional sequence of credits to obtain a Certificate in GIS. GIS skills are broadly advertised as a workforce development component of the Environmental Studies program at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

The program, as currently designed, allows students who have an interest in both the environment and sciences, but may lack to quantitative skills or focus required for “traditional” STEM disciplines such as Chemistry or pre-professional Biology, to pursue an academic major related to environmental studies. While Calculus I, Chemistry I and II, and Analytical Chemistry are required for students in the Natural Science track, the Environmental Management requires only pre-Calculus Algebra and no Chemistry beyond Chemistry II. This separation of a less-quantitative track (Environmental Management) facilitates involvement by students who lack (or perceive themselves to lack) the necessary science and math skills to pursue an environmental degree; however, it also leads to a persistent problem: the perception that the Environmental Studies program (and associated Environmental Science degree) is less rigorous than its traditional STEM counterparts. That perception certainly has a basis in reality. Additionally, the program suffers from being broad at the expense of depth in a particular study area.

Career development within the UWF Environmental Studies program involves academic preparation in a broad range of aspects of environmental science content (e.g., Geography of Soils, Basic Hydrology, Weather and Climate, Coastal Morphology) as well as specific technical skills related to GIS. The program considers practical expertise in the environmental field to be of paramount importance. Students may elect to complete an independent research project or complete an internship/practicum experience outside the university. Many students complete their internships with either Jackson Guard at Eglin AFB or with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s Ecosystem restoration Program. All undergraduate students are required to complete an advanced practical skills course (Applications in GIS or Methods and Techniques in Environmental Resource Management and Planning).