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Future Planet Studies: embedding soil science in an interdisciplinary sustainability bachelor program

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In the last decades we have increasingly seen a shift in higher education away from teaching soil science at the undergraduate level as stand-alone program or as part of more traditional Earth sciences programs. Instead, soil science is increasingly embedded in larger interdisciplinary programs. These can be programs within the realm of the natural sciences, e.g. combining soil science and ecology to study ecosystem functioning. Or they may be broader still, and include elements from the social sciences, economics, political science, etc.. Such broad interdisciplinary sustainability programs offer great opportunities, as they enable students to study soil sciences as part of the complex human-nature interactions that underpin the grand challenges of our time. However, teaching soil science in such in the context of an interdisciplinary sustainability program faces important challenges as well. These include finding a proper balance between broad orientation and specialization, and finding the truly interdisciplinary professors to teach the program.

At the University of Amsterdam, in 2006 we embedding our soil science teaching in the interdisciplinary Bachelor program Future Planet Studies (FPS) that includes natural sciences and social sciences components. In my presentation I aim to share some experiences from the evolution of the FPS program over the last 15 years. I will highlight some of our successes, and some of the challenges that we are still struggling with. With this I hope to initiate a discussion about the role of soil science in interdisciplinary programs, and learn from the experience of others.