



Building Environmental Character: A Joint Effort to Cultivate Tomorrow's Environmental Stewards

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The College of Education, in collaboration with the Charles E. Schmidt College of Science, has been awarded a 2025 Capacity-Building Grant from the Educating Character Initiative (ECI). This competitive grant, funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., is part of the Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University and is one of only 40 awarded to institutions nationwide. The grant supports the development of "Wise Owls: Building Character Education for Florida Atlantic's Future Environmental Leaders, Educators, Advocates, Scientists, and Stewards," a pioneering initiative designed to integrate character education into environmental studies. This initiative also reflects Florida Atlantic's growing leadership in interdisciplinary education and its commitment to providing students with technical expertise and ethical acumen to tackle complex environmental challenges.

The Wise Owls project is led by Bryan Nichols, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the College of Education's Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Michelle Petersen, Ph.D., Assistant Scientist and Director of the Environmental Science Program in the Schmidt College of Science. Representing a collaborative initiative, Wise Owls will be implemented through the School of Environmental, Coastal, and Ocean Sustainability (ECOS), Florida Atlantic's interdisciplinary hub for environmental research, education, and outreach. Laying the groundwork for ethical education in specialty areas like environmental education, this initiative is positioned to serve as a catalyst for embedding character education more broadly in Florida Atlantic's academic programs.

At the core of the Wise Owls project is a commitment to equipping students with the moral and civic virtues essential for environmental stewardship. Through a combination of curricular innovation, faculty development, and student engagement, the project will explore what it means to be a person of character in the environmental sciences. It will also develop strategies for teaching and assessing these character traits in undergraduate education.

For Florida Atlantic's students, the benefits are both immediate and long-term. Wise Owls will create new opportunities for students to engage in reflective learning, ethical reasoning, and community-based environmental work. By integrating character education into existing and new courses, students will gain valuable skills to navigate the ethical challenges of environmental advocacy, policy, and science.



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“This grant allows us to deepen our commitment to educating the whole student,” said Nichols. “We're not just preparing students to be scientists or educators—we're preparing them to be thoughtful, principled leaders who can make a meaningful difference in the world.”

Launched by Wake Forest University's Program for Leadership and Character, ECI supports institutions across the country in advancing character education. Through research, resource development, and grantmaking, ECI fosters a national network of educators committed to placing character at the center of undergraduate education.

The Wise Owls project aims to position Florida Atlantic as a leader in character-based environmental education by empowering students to become not only experts in their fields, but also ethical stewards of the planet.