Extension faculty are leading a collaborative new program focused on the impact of climate change on Connecticut communities. The UConn Climate Corps will bring together undergraduates enrolled in environmental majors with town officials, to the benefit of both groups. The program is supported for three years by a competitive grant from the UConn Provost’s Office, in support of the Academic Plan goals of Excellence in Undergraduate Education and Public Engagement.

Students at the University are increasingly interested in the topic of climate change, that many feel is the environmental issue of our time. At the same time, many communities across Connecticut are struggling with how to adapt to climate change, and how to marshal the resources needed to do so. To address these complementary needs, Extension faculty associated with the Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR) have developed the Climate Corps, a new multi-departmental collaboration at UConn that will combine classroom instruction and service learning to create a unique assistance program for Connecticut communities. Students in the Environmental Studies, Environmental Science, and Environmental Engineering majors will be recruited for the program, that consists of a class during the fall semester and in-the-field work with town officials during the following spring semester.

The class, Climate Resilience and Adaptation: Municipal Policy and Planning, will first be offered in the fall semester of 2017-2018 academic year and will focus on local, practical issues and impacts arising from climate change. Extension’s Juliana Barrett will lead the course but will be team-taught by Climate Corps team members and outside experts. “This course is not so much about the physical science of climate change as it is about local policy responses,” says Barrett. “In order for the students to really understand how climate change can affect local policies and operations, they have to have a firm grasp on how decisions...
are made at the town level, so there will be a focus on local decision making and on the federal and state legal frameworks in which towns operate.”

Students who complete the fall course are then eligible for the spring practicum course, led by Extension's Bruce Hyde. The practicum builds upon the ongoing work of Hyde and Barrett, who form the CLEAR/Sea Grant climate team and have been working with towns for several years, including organizing a series of workshops called the Climate Adaptation Academy (see tools and training at right). Students will form into teams of 3 or 4, each working with Hyde and other Extension faculty to engage selected towns on climate adaptation needs. Towns will have to apply to be included in the program, and several towns have already expressed interest before the application form has been issued. After meeting with town officials the students will embark on one or more projects designed to support the town's adaptations efforts. These projects could include vulnerability assessments, evaluation of adaptation options, outreach strategies and products for educating the citizens, or other options.

A land use planner with over 30 years of experience working at the municipal level, Hyde is in tune with the world of local government. “Most towns understand that planning for climate adaptation is critical, yet many are unable to find the resources to begin the process,” says Hyde. “Our experience with our Extension undergraduate interns over the past several years has taught us that these students can do very high quality, sophisticated work, and we want to harness that work to the benefit of the towns. And at the same time, it provides a great ‘real world’ service learning experience for the students.” He notes that through their undergraduate training and simply by the technology-friendly nature of their generation, the students have the capacity to perform research, mapping and other tasks that are beyond the reach of busy local planners.

The Climate Corps is a unique multi-department collaboration between CLEAR, Connecticut Sea Grant, and the three Environmental majors, that in turn involve the departments of Geography, Civil and Environmental Engineering, and Natural Resources and the Environment. The project team includes the Directors of all of these programs in addition to Barrett and Hyde, feels strongly that the Corps can become a model program that eventually can be expanded in scope, expanded in topical focus, and perhaps adapted by other universities and other states. Class starts in September!

“Most towns understand that planning for climate adaptation is critical, yet many are unable to find the resources to begin the process...”

Exploring Legal Issues

The Climate Adaptation Academy (CAA) created by Juliana Barrett and Bruce Hyde has been engaging community officials, citizens and others for over four years, in a series of iterative workshops designed to gather input as much as to dispense information. The CAA’s latest focus is on the many legal issues that can arise at the local level as a result of climate change. A workshop in the fall of 2015 on this topic, Legal Issues in the Age of Climate Adaptation, was a sell-out and ended with a long Q&A session between workshop participants and a panel of six prominent land use attorneys. Faced with a long list of complex legal questions, only a few of which could be addressed at the workshop, Barrett and Hyde decided to pursue the matter by contacting the Rhode Island Sea Grant Legal Program (one of only four Sea Grant legal and policy centers in the nation). The result is a new series of fact sheets on high priority climate-related legal issues, that are being widely distributed and will be the basis for follow-up workshops. The fact sheets are available on their website at climate.uconn.edu.