

Honors 498: Nature, Sustainability, and Capitalism

Fall 2015

Tuesday/Thursday 10:50-12:05 (Westside or Midtown)

Dr. Mary B. O'Neill

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Course Description:

This course is designed to encourage students to reflect upon their relationship to nature as a person and as an economic being. The importance of this examination is demonstrated each day as we face mounting threats to the environmental sustainability of our lives on earth. The approach of this course will be “glocal.” We will endeavor to build a very personal connection to nature on the individual level taking a bottom-up approach. At the same time we will explore a top-down strategy examining issues in sustainability as well as how our growth economy could potentially undercut our efforts to build a sustainable society.

Students will examine elements of the history of sustainability and conservation; trends in food production; current issues in sustainability such as climate change and fracking; ways in which individuals can build a closer relationship with the natural world through direct interaction and creative expression; economic theories of capitalism, growth, consumer mindset, and alternative methods to measure economic and societal well being; the role of the business community in damaging and healing our environment; and strategies for individuals to make a contribution to sustainability efforts on a local level and beyond.

Required Texts:

Sustainability by Leslie Paul Thiele

American Earth by Bill McKibben

Handouts and links provided by instructor

Course Goals and Objectives

- Introduce students to the concept of sustainability from several lenses such as poetry and literature, science, history, philosophy, economics
- Examine impact of human activity on our planet
- Understand the connection between our environment, sustainability, and capitalist economy
- Examine the role of the business community in sustainability
- Encourage students to consider themselves as part of the natural world and develop a personal connection to it.
- Engage students in an examination of their relation to nature as individuals and as social, economic, and political beings

Course Outcomes

- Analyze and interpret a wide range of primary and secondary source materials such as articles, speeches, literature, poetry, theoretical texts, scientific findings, and legislative actions. **Assessment Method:** reading quizzes and group activities; midterm and final assessment; class and online discussion and journals

- Gain an understanding and be able to articulate the impact of human life and economic activity on our environment. **Assessment Method:** class and online discussions, group and individual projects and debates, midterm and final assessments
- Speak knowledgeably about issues in sustainability such as fracking, food production, water scarcity, climate change, and economic incentives and measures of economic success. **Assessment Methodology:** reading quizzes and participation activities, projects and debates, midterm and final assessment
- Better appreciate the student's own connection to nature on a personal level and seek avenues for connecting with like-minded individuals for action on a global level. **Assessment Methodology:** online journal, class discussion, projects
- Demonstrate critical thinking skills with regard to the complexities of sustainability's three pillars: society, environment, and economy (or in the parlance of the business community's triple bottom line: people, planet, and profits). **Assessment Methodology:** class discussion, projects, midterm and final assessment

Modes of Inquiry

- I. **Textual:** Students will engage with and analyze a variety of texts pertaining to sustainability including poems, essays, speeches, fiction, film and documentaries, websites, and corporate mission statements and annual reports.
- II. **Scientific:** Students will engage in mathematical and scientific aspects of sustainability particularly pertaining to population growth; food production and GMOs, GDP vs. more inclusive measures of societal well being such as Happy Planet Index; Nature Deficit Disorder; permaculture theory; impact of technology on sustainability; climate change; fracking; alternative energy production; and difficulties of financially assessing the true cost of goods and services to our environment. Students will be expected to develop a PowerPoint on an aspect of the natural world (an insect, plant, or force of nature) that they will present to classmates. There will also be group debates on environmental issues such as climate change, fracking, Keystone pipeline, water scarcity
- III. **Historical, Cultural, and Social:** Students will examine texts from the history of the conservation movement and the impact of our consumer culture on sustainability. They will also determine whether or not a growth economy based in capitalism helps or hinders sustainability of the planet. Students will explore the concept of the global commons vs. private ownership, environmental justice, as well as consider the impact of choice architecture in our decision-making process about efforts to be more sustainable.
- IV. **Artistic Creation and Analysis:** Students will read and analyze poetry, music and art that celebrate a connection to nature and implore us to save it. Students will create an interpretive art project using recycled objects to express their attempts to grapple with a particular issue or concept we have studied. As a final project students will be expected to create a work that reflects a connection between what we have learned to their major course of study or area of interest. For example, a care plan for a patient grounded in the healing properties of nature, a musical piece that expresses the tenuous state of our planet, a lesson plan for elementary school students that engages them with nature, or a business plan for a sustainably-minded company or product.

Blackboard

Handouts for additional required reading will be provided in class, via Blackboard.

The instructor will make heavy use of Blackboard for posting additional required reading. You must download and print readings from these sites as they are announced. Please ask a computer help desk or the instructor if you need help gaining access to this system.

Reading and written assignments, the course calendar with due dates, and student grades throughout the term will be posted on Blackboard. To be successful a student must check Blackboard regularly for updates and assignments.

Class Email Notices

Each student has a WCSU email account and this is the only way the instructor will be sending email notices of class readings and assignments, information and updates. These announcements will also appear in Blackboard I will not be sending emails to personal email accounts unless it is an emergency. **YOU MUST GET THIS ACCOUNT UP AND RUNNING AND CHECK IT EACH DAY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THIS COURSE.**

Class Cancellation

If I must cancel class I will do this via email by 9:00 a.m. before our class meeting at 10:50 a.m. **This notification will be through the university email system and Blackboard.**

Assessments

There will be **two major assessments** in the course in the form of exams based on the readings, viewings, assignments, and class discussions. These tests will be in short answer and essay format given in class. **Make-ups are NOT given.**

Attendance

Because the textbook is supplemented in class by outside materials, class discussions, in class exercises and/or lectures, class attendance is critical for a full understanding of the course.

Attendance will be taken each class. Please arrive on time and expect to stay for the entire class period.

For this class the attendance policy is as follows:

- **Three late arrivals or early leavings will constitute one absence. If a student arrives after attendance is taken it is his or her responsibility to inform instructor to amend the attendance sheet.**
- **Missing five classes for any reason will result in a decrease in your final grade by one full letter grade. So an A becomes a B.**
- **Missing six or more classes will result in a one-half letter grade reduction for each additional missed class. So that B now becomes a B-, C+, C- etc....**
- **In addition, due to federal regulations regarding attendance and financial aid, if a student has *three unexcused absences consecutively* then the instructor will record the student as “stops attending,” notify the Registrar, and the student will be administratively withdrawn from the class by the Registrar.**

WCSU recognizes the correlation between attendance and both student retention and achievement. Any class session or activity missed, regardless of cause, reduces the opportunity for learning and may adversely affect a student's achievement in the course. Class attendance is required beginning with the first class meeting, and students are expected to attend all class sessions for which they are registered. It is the responsibility of the student to arrange to make up all course work missed because of legitimate class absences and to notify the instructor when an absence will occur. The instructor determines the effect of absences on grades. Students who are reported as never attending a course may be withdrawn from the class by the College. Funds may be adjusted or rescinded for students who are receiving financial aid or veterans' benefits.

Class Participation

Class participation will be graded through quizzes, written exercises, journal entries, and group activities assigned in previous class or administered at the beginning of each class and worth up to 5 points per class session (150 points total).

The timed in-class exercises will be brief and based upon assigned readings and previous class discussions. You will normally have the first 10-15 minutes of class to complete these exercises (sometimes more if the exercise requires it). You must be in class on time to make the most of these points, and papers are collected when the allotted time has elapsed. If you are late you will miss the exercise or compromise your ability to complete these assignments and you will not be granted extra time. You should be in class ready to roll at the scheduled class commencement time.

There are no make-ups for missed participation exercises and assessments. If you are not in class you can't participate. This is not designed to be punitive and missing up to three of them should not adversely affect your grade.

Blackboard Discussion and Journals

There will be an online discussion and journaling component of this class based upon the required readings and class discussions. The instructor will demonstrate how to access and navigate Blackboard for these purposes. The discussion will be a class activity and the journal will be a private reflection shared only with the instructor. However, if the journal entry refers to or states an intention to harm self or others the instructor is required to share this information with appropriate individuals in the WCSU administration.

Assignments

There will also be writing assignments, presentations and homework based on **required** assigned reading and class discussions. These assignments will be a blend of comprehension and critical thinking and will require careful consideration.

Late papers and assignments completed outside class will only be accepted with documented excuse and at the instructor's discretion. If you miss a class on the day a paper or homework assignment is due the instructor will accept it electronically if it is turned in by 10:50 a.m. (the start of class). **The student must then submit a printed version for grading purposes.**

Grading Components (based on 1,000 points)

Midterm	200
Final Exam	200
Assignments/Projects	200
Group Debates	100
Participation	150 (approx. 5 points per class)
Blackboard Discussions	75 (3 @ 25 points each)
Blackboard Journal	75 (3 @ 25 points each)

Grading Scale

A 930-1000	C 700-749
A- 900-929	C- 650-699
B+ 870-899	D+ 600-649
B 830-869	D 540-599
B- 800-829	D- 500-539
C+ 750-799	F less than 500

Important Dates (Note: These dates will obviously be updated to reflect Fall 2015 important dates)

September 1

First day of class
Last day to drop/add
Midterm (projected date—subject to change)
Midterm Grades Due
Thanksgiving Holiday
Withdrawal without academic penalty deadline

December 3

Last day of HUM 498 Class
Make-up/Reading day—optional review session for final
Final Exam
Final Grades Due

Honors 498 Fine Print

Plagiarism and Cheating

Cheating and plagiarism are completely unacceptable and if proven can result in any or all of the following: zero on particular assessment or assignment, failing class grade, formal charges by the university for academic dishonesty. University definitions of cheating and plagiarism and their consequences are outlined in the Student Handbook in the Academic Honesty Policies and Regulations section. If students are unclear about what constitutes cheating and plagiarism, please see the instructor.

Seating

The instructor reserves the right to institute an assigned seating policy for students who are disruptive to the class in any way.

Writing Lab and Tutoring Center/Study Skills Lab

The University provides free assistance to students who require additional support with writing and study skills. Clear writing, note taking, and digesting course readings are integral parts of this course and students are urged to take proactive advantage of those services that are aimed at developing the necessary skills. The Center is now located in office 303 of Haas Library.

Students requiring Accommodations

Students with who require special accommodation must present an accommodation letter from AccessAbility Services. The student must contact AccessAbility Services at 203-837-8199 or visit them in their new location in the Higgins Annex Room 017. Student requests for accommodations in the class or during exams will not be honored without this official letter.

Office Hours

Office hours are by appointment on Tuesday and Thursday from 10:00 to 10:30 a.m. on Westside Campus in a mutually agreeable location. On midtown campus office hours are **by appointment** on those days from 12:30 to 3:30 p.m. in instructor office located in 021C in White Hall. To set up an appointment please contact instructor in person via email. The instructor is always available by email for questions and will usually respond within 24 hours. Emails sent after 5 p.m. will likely not be answered until the next day.

Cell Phones, Texting, Laptops

Cell phones must be switched off—not put on silent mode—and put away during class. Texting and talking on the phone are not allowed under any circumstances. Violation of this policy will result in losing your participation points for that given day. Viewing the class readings on cell phones is also not permitted.

Laptops are strongly discouraged in this class. If a student is found to be on the internet or social media during class time will also result in a 10 point deduction of the student's participation grade. In addition, the student will be unable to return to class with a computer or tablet as it will be considered a distraction to the class learning environment.

Counseling Center

WCSU has an excellent counseling center that is free and confidential. If you are feeling depressed, anxious, isolated, or fragile in any way please make use of this helpful team of professionals. The instructor is always willing to help students make contact with that department, which is located in Student Center room 222 or (203)837-8690.

Instructor Expectations of Students

1. Student must come prepared to be an engaged learner. This means bringing the required books or handouts, notebook and pens. Do not ask instructor to borrow a pen.
2. Student must have a working WCSU email account and check in on a daily basis.
3. Student must download required texts from Eres or Blackboard in advance of discussion.
4. Student should plot reading and written assignments and exams on a calendar and not leave them to the last minute.
5. Student should respect the differing opinions and beliefs of his/her colleagues. All discourse should be respectful and in the spirit of learning. Rude comments and personal attacks will not be tolerated.
6. Student must participate in class either through questions or comments about the material. Participation can also be via email to the instructor with questions or comments.
7. If student is having trouble with material he/she should make appointment with the instructor for extra help. Student should NEVER suffer in silence.
8. Student should be prepared to take intellectual risks. No learning occurs without mistakes.
9. Student should have a network of colleagues to obtain assignments and notes from. Ignorance of assignments, tests or readings because of absence is not a valid excuse.
- 10. Student is ultimately responsible for his/her own success in the course.**

Tentative Schedule for Fall 2015

I cannot pinpoint with accuracy what we will discuss on each class session at this time and having never run the class before. However, this is a rough outline of the pacing of the course. I would like to remain somewhat flexible to explore topics of particular interest and/or take advantage of opportunities that may arise during the term or activities that the class decides to plan as a whole.

In general I envision that we will work through the text, **Sustainability** by Thiele. Each chapter examines a different component of sustainability and makes reference work by various individuals in the sustainability and conservation field. We will then read excerpts of the works mentioned by Thiele from **American Earth** by McKibben along with items from current events. Then we will use group work, class discussion and presentations to look for connections to our lives.

Week of September 1	Sustainability Introduction and group building activity
Week of September 8	Chapter 1- Sustainability and Time
Week of September 15	Chapter 2- Geography of Sustainability
Week of September 22	Chapter 3- Ecological Resilience and Environmental Health
Week of September 29	Applying what we know from Chapter 3
Week of October 6	Chapter 4-Technological Solutions and Problems

Week of October 13	Applying what we know from Chapter 4
Week of October 20	Chapter 5- Political and Legal Challenges
Week of October 27	Applying what we know from Chapter 5
Week of November 3	Chapter 6- Sustaining Economies
Week of November 10	Applying what we know from Chapter 6
Week of November 17	Chapter 7- Culture and Change
Week of November 17	Applying what we know from Chapter 7
Week of November 24	Presentations (Thanksgiving week)
Week of December 1	Presentations/Review

The following enhancements could be added:

- Volunteer in Jane Goodall permaculture garden at WCSU
- Research specific products on Good Guide and Environmental Working Group websites
- Research legislators and laws regarding the environment and craft correspondence regarding a particular issue
- Guest speakers from business community to talk about Triple Bottom Line and issues in sustainability. The class and I could work with CCCI and the Ancell School to identify business leaders from community to talk to the class about their companies and how sustainability fits into their work and perhaps issues of environmental justice. An ambitious plan would involve the honors students organizing a panel presentation of business people on the topic that could be organized with CCCI and Ancell School.
- Explore hiking trail on Westside campus
- Conversation with SODEXO and/or Mr. Luigi Marcone regarding food and sustainability on campus—recycling, fuel cell, reducing waste, etc....