

## Chesapeake Project: Integrating Sustainability Across the Curriculum

AMST 340: Introduction to Theories and Methods in American Studies  
Theme: Sustaining Cultures and Environments in the Americas  
Fall 2010

Mary Corbin Sies, Department of American Studies

AMST 340 is the required history-theory-methods course for American Studies undergraduate majors. It is the first of a two-part set of courses that culminates in the Senior Capstone Project in AMST 450, the Senior Seminar. AMST 340 has two aims: 1) expand students' knowledge of American Studies scholarship, theories, and methods, and 2) help them develop the formal proposal for the capstone project that they will complete in the subsequent semester. Previously, sustainability has not even registered as a blip on the radar screen of this seminar, one of three required of all AMST majors. My goal is to incorporate sustainability as a central component of how we think about American Studies scholarship, alongside, say, racial formation theory, intersectionality, globalization, and the study of the cultures of everyday life, for example. Although AMST 340 is capped at 20 students, my department teaches at least two sections of the course each semester. I will teach three of these in 2010-2011 and, thus, I have an excellent opportunity to begin the process of incorporating sustainability into the core curriculum of the department. I expect to be teaching this course for some time.

Sustainability is usually defined as having three pillars: environmental, economic, and social. In this course we will frame sustainability as having four pillars: environmental responsibility, economic health, social equity, and cultural vitality. The "four pillars" framework is widely used in Pacific Rim countries, whose planners have recognized that a community's vitality and quality of life are closely linked to the health of its culture, as indicated by the quality of its citizens' cultural engagement, expression through traditions and the arts, dialogue over cultural values, and communal celebrations. The "four pillars" approach dovetails easily with my field's focus on cultural studies and its insistent interdisciplinarity.

There is considerable historical and current scholarship in American studies that treats sustainability issues, if not always by that name. My own research specialties-- the study of North American suburbs, cultural landscape studies, historic preservation, and cultural sustainability—engage sustainability issues quite integrally. Many scholars in my field consider how environmental problems are fundamentally based on how Americans organize human society. Once I focused AMST 340 on the theme of Sustaining Cultures and Environments in the Americas, I found it surprisingly easy to "mainstream" sustainability into the course. In addition to a handful of sessions setting out the study of sustainability from different dimensions, I had no trouble finding readings and films that focused on the theme in connection with other core concepts in American Studies or showcased particular methods used for studying sustainability issues. Many American Studies scholars are practitioners of cultural criticism and I have included critiques of mainstream sustainability rhetoric and practice as well. Several assignments will encourage students to think about how and whether to embrace sustainability in their scholarship and their everyday lives.