

Chesapeake Project: Integrating Sustainability Across the Curriculum

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AMST 450 – Senior Seminar in American Studies
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Theme: Social and Cultural Issues in Sustainable Consumption

AMST 450 seminar is the capstone course for the major. It serves the needs of American Studies majors who plan to graduate by providing training in researching and integrating extensive primary and secondary texts in order to formulate a senior thesis. Following AMST 340, students in this course identify a problem, collect data to establish the nature of the problem, and analyze the outcome(s) using the theories and methods of American Studies scholarship with emphasis upon cultural analysis and evaluation. Ultimately, students write a 30-page paper (plus notes).

Often times the capstone course has a theme. Because the challenge of sustainability is its profoundly crosscutting nature, it is a useful theme to apply to this course. To this end, this year's focus is "Sustainable Consumption." Students will be introduced to the prevailing theoretical model of sustainability—the social, environmental, and economic nexus or the "triple bottom line." But we will also consider another prevailing point of view, a fourth pillar—cultural vitality. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2001) states "...cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature"; it becomes "one of the roots of development understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence."

Though mainstream thinking sees environmental studies as the primary discipline for studying sustainability, a fourth pillar allows a wider range of disciplines to have a voice including American Studies. This approach enables a more interdisciplinary undertaking to take place that contributes to a broader understanding of sustainability. Using methods of cultural studies and interdisciplinarity, generally, students will be expected to consider what sustainability means to their research project.

Because most of us engage in some aspect of production and consumption in our daily lives, students in this semester's course will be asked to include an aspect of sustainable consumption in their overall analysis. Sustainable consumption is defined as "consuming goods and services without harming the environment or society," a perspective that is said to be essential to overcoming poverty and conserving and protecting our natural resources. We will consider the merits of this definition during the course of the semester as we explore my own research subject area—food and gender—among others.