URP 527 - Foundations of Sustainable Food Systems

Fall 2023
Tuesday and Thursday, 1:00PM – 2:30PM, (Likely) Dana Building 2024 (Central Campus)
Professors: Lesli Hoey (URP), Andy Jones (SPH), Jennifer Blesh (SEAS)
NOTE: Other masters and upper-level undergraduates also enroll in this class, through:
ENVIRON 462, EAS 528, NUTR 555, & URP 427

Concurrent food, energy, water, and climate crises, and a global rise in diet-related disease and overnutrition amidst widespread hunger and undernutrition have re-focused public attention on the deficiencies and complexities of the global food system. The dominant industrial food system is increasingly resulting in well-documented social, ecological, and health-related costs. Increasing food system sustainability requires interdisciplinarity along multiple dimensions: reconnecting agriculture with ecological systems, reshaping food production systems to be more nutrition-sensitive, and ensuring that policies and institutions that impact the food system safeguard social equity and the environment. Demand is growing for interdisciplinary scholars and professionals who are equipped to analyze and address the complex challenges of sustainable food production and global food and nutrition security. This course will offer a unique opportunity for students to gain interdisciplinary knowledge of food systems and to integrate theory and practice through experiential learning and dialogue-based inquiry both on campus and in the community. Benefitting from collaborative instruction that draws on the expertise of professors from three different departments, students will incorporate multiple perspectives from local to global levels, examine how those perspectives are underpinned by different epistemologies and value systems, and practice systems thinking.

Course objectives
By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1) describe key concepts across disciplines and perspectives related to sustainable food systems;
2) apply systems thinking tools to the analysis of food systems issues including those related to agroecology, public health, and food policy and urban planning;
3) evaluate assumptions and values about food systems that underpin one's own thinking and that of others;
4) apply and synthesize scientific evidence in support of arguments that address food systems research questions and professional problem-solving;
5) analyze and critically evaluate food systems research results and policies for evidence-based assessments and ethical decision-making;
6) communicate clearly and effectively about food systems through writing and oral presentations in a professional setting of diverse peers; and
7) engage in respectful dialogue, collaborative teamwork, and problem-solving with those of differing viewpoints and backgrounds.

Suggested prior coursework
Because this course is open to students from different academic disciplines and professional backgrounds, and because it is available to both upper-level undergraduate students as well as graduate students, we expect that enrolled students will bring with them a diversity of skills, knowledge and practical experiences that will broadly benefit the entire class. For these same reasons, however, it is unrealistic to expect that every student should have completed a similar curriculum prior to enrolling in this course. We suggest, though, that students will benefit from having completed one or more of the following courses prior to joining this class: an introductory course in biology, environmental science, ecology, urban planning, food policy, epidemiology, and/or human nutrition.