

FALL 2008
3 credits

ISSUES IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Agronomy 450

Environmental Studies 450

Section 1: MWF 11:00-11:50, Room 2020, Agronomy Hall
Section 2: MWF 2:10-3:00, Room 15, Curtiss Hall

Instructor:

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Office Hours:

Tuesday 3:00-5:00

(You can always make an appointment by e-mailing me or talking to me after class. I also don't mind if you just show up at my office. I will be happy to help, if I don't have other things pressing, but don't be offended if I am busy and we need to make an appointment for another time.)

Course Texts:

Hurt, R. Douglas. 2002. **Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century.** Ivan R. Dee: Chicago.
Additional readings will be assigned during the semester

Course Objectives:

Students will have the opportunity to:

- identify current issues and challenges facing modern agriculture
- explore the agricultural system of the US, understand some of the factors underlying its development, and look at its effect on world agriculture
- think about the needs and purposes of agricultural systems elsewhere in the world
- reflect on the impact each of us has on the agricultural system and the impact the agricultural system has on each of us
- discuss issues in agriculture using evidence, reasoned argument and balanced perspective
- evaluate their own arguments and the arguments of others
- recognize the ethical perspectives of others and have a clearer understanding of one's own values and ethical perspective

Course Introduction:

Farm Bill. Subsidies. World Trade Organization. Agricultural Pollution. Food Security. Energy Shortages. Ethanol. Productivity. Efficiency. Land Values. Farmer Bankruptcies. Global Competition. Organic Agriculture. Animal Confinements. Costs of Food.

There are increasing numbers of issues that are beating at the door of agriculture and there are US and world scientists, researchers, farmers, activists, students and writers who are posing questions and deep concerns about the nature of agriculture today. Are these questions and concerns justified? Should we be paying attention to these commentaries or discarding them as irrelevant? Is the US agricultural system successful? Can it, as it is constituted, continue the way it is? Is it better to think of it as a world agricultural system; a local agricultural system or perhaps both?

What is happening *in* agriculture and *to* agriculture and how best can we understand the challenges that agriculture is facing today and will face in the future? Where is agriculture headed and what do we think about this?

There is a lot of information available on issues in sustainable agriculture, accessible almost everywhere you turn, and it often contains strong opinions, viewpoints and ‘sides’. Our class, therefore, has *two* tasks to accomplish—to explore these issues *and* to assess and evaluate that information systematically. How do we judge information and decide what to believe?

This will not be easy work—especially so for those of us working in or planning to work in professions based in agriculture. It will require all of us to come to class willing and ready to participate and think through the information and the arguments presented. The more we make the effort to do the preparations and to practice the skills we will use in the class, the better the class will be.

Structure of the class:

The class will be organized around the following activities:

- Class Lectures
- Guest and outside lectures
- In-class discussions and exercises
- Readings (the text and others as given)
- Assignments:
 - Inquiries
 - Analyses
 - Team project (poster)

Student Assignments and Grading:

Attendance and in-class participation	30% of total grade
<i>Includes spot attendance checks, engaging in class discussion, chapter synopses from text and worksheets from outside lectures</i>	
Inquiries	30% of total grade
Article analyses	10% of total grade
Team issues project	30% of total grade

Assignments	Due Dates
1 st Analysis	Wednesday, September 10th
1 st Inquiry	Friday, September 26th
2 nd Analysis	Monday, October 13th
2 nd Inquiry	Monday, October 27th
3 rd Analysis	Friday, November 21st
3 rd Inquiry	Finals week
Poster Presentations (2 teams/class)	Dec 1, 3, 5, 8, 10

Inquiries and Analyses:

Objectives:

- To explore ideas, opinions and issues brought forth in the subject matter of the class and from the different perspectives brought by class participants.
- To learn to weigh and evaluate information for the purpose of analyzing complex problems.
- To employ and expand skills developed in class (critical thinking, argument analysis, written exploration and argument of complex and cross-disciplinary issues)
- To develop skills in comparing information with your own beliefs and ideas, and generating a more complete and well-rounded understanding of an issue.

Specifics on assignments:

1. Inquiries:

- There will be three inquiries spaced across the semester; the last will serve as the class final examination
- Each inquiry will consist of your choice amongst two or three essay questions
- You will hand in a 3-5 page response (as long as it takes to do a good job!). It should be:
 - Typed
 - Double spaced
 - Use a 12-pt font, such as Times, or Arial
 - Use normal margins (1.25"/side, 1"/top and bottom)
- Though this will, in part, be an opinion piece, you will be expected to give sound reasons for your statements and your work will be evaluated on:
 - The thought and reflection you show on the topic chosen
 - How well you have incorporated the information from class discussions, readings and lectures
 - How convincingly you have made your points
- Corroborating information can (and should!) be drawn from your class notes, the readings, the speakers, and any outside reading (newspapers, magazines, journals, books, etc.) that help you make your points. **Remember to include references to any material you quote or use extensively.**
 - Plagiarism is unacceptable and, according to University policy, incidents where plagiarism is suspected will be passed along to the Dean of Students Office.
- Each inquiry will be worth 10 points toward your class grade

2. Analyses:

- There will be three article analyses spaced across the semester
- Each analysis will consist of examining and evaluating the contents of an article that I will hand out to the class.
 - We'll go over the analysis of the first article in class to further clarify the assignment
- You will hand in a 3-5 page response. It should be:
 - Typed
 - Double spaced
 - 12-pt font, such as Times, or Arial
 - Normal margins (1.25"/side, 1"/top and bottom)
- As the semester progresses, I will expect you to incorporate the comments I make on improving your analyses—so the expectations for your work will increase over the semester.
- Each analysis will be worth 5 points toward your class grade.

3. Team Poster Project:

The class will be organized into teams of 4-5 people each, and each team will select a current and contentious issue in agriculture relating to sustainability. As a group, you will prepare a poster that you will use to communicate the different positions on the issue and their most relevant points and perspectives to the class.

The challenge in this assignment is to make the visual presentation of the poster help you deliver the information.

Sample Topics: Pastured vs dry lot beef, options for swine producers, corn-based ethanol or other biofuels, conservation reserve programs, water issues related to agriculture, GMOs, organic agriculture, niche markets, land prices in Iowa, urban sprawl and pressures on agriculture....

- Objectives:
 - To work in a team setting that will be similar to one you may face in your personal or professional life after university.

- To have the opportunity to explore one issue addressing agricultural sustainability more deeply
- To have the opportunity to learn about other issues in agricultural sustainability as presented by your peers
- To develop skills in creating poster presentations that may serve you well for other venues (such as conferences, professional presentations, etc.)
- To think deeply about real world solutions for various problems in this realm
- **Specifics:**
 - *Poster*
 1. Create a poster, **at least 3’x4’**, that can be hung on the classroom wall (using masking tape)
 - Submit your poster to the Baker Lab in 2216 Agronomy. Materials need to be submitted to them **AT LEAST four working days in advance**.
 - Create your posters in PowerPoint—the Baker Lab has had difficulties printing posters from other programs
 - **Make sure the format of the poster is sized to 36” x 48”.**
 - The cost of printing the poster is included in your class fee
 2. Each poster should include the following components, arranged in an attractive, readable and logical manner:
 - The background and central elements of the issue
 - A fair representation of the breadth of positions on the issue
 - Potential solutions and how they relate to different positions
 - Does your group feel there an optimal solution? Why it is optimal? Is there a fair distribution of benefits and costs?
 - List of references used
 - List of students in the group
 3. Incorporating photos, graphs, charts or other forms of visual information is both useful and effective in a poster. However, *every word and every picture must count*—you are working to balance readability and information. Too much information, and the font size is so small, people can’t read it. Too little information, and your poster does not communicate very much about the issue.
 4. Each project should draw from **at least 8 references** (journal articles, books, credible magazine articles, news articles, published research and the like).
 - *Only one reference may be a website!*
 - *Presentation:*
 1. Prepare an outline of the presentation for the class and instructor to refer to during the presentation. This will allow the members of your audience to track your information and make use of your resources in the future, if they wish. Include:
 - Title of the presentation
 - The main points and sub-points of the presentation
 - A list of the references used
 - Names of the members of the group

This is due the class before your presentation so that I can make copies for everyone.
 2. Plan for your presentation to take 18-20 minutes, incorporating all group members
 - Practice ahead of time and stay within the time limits
 - All of the group members should take some responsibilities in the presentation.
 - The only aid you will use for the presentation will be the poster. No other PowerPoint or other visual/auditory aids, please.
 5. Each presentation will be followed by 5 minutes of questions from the class.

- *Assessment:*
 1. Each group will be evaluated by the rest of the class and by myself. Criteria for the evaluation will include:
 - Demonstrating thought and analysis of the issue—showing the different ‘sides’ of the issue whenever appropriate
 - Depth of research
 - Providing a convincing presentation and evidence for that presentation
 - Quality and effectiveness of presentation
 - Organization of the information
 - Attractiveness and readability of poster
 - Delivery style
 - Breadth of information covered
 - How well the group responded to questions
 2. Each poster group will also do evaluations of the effort and contributions of individuals within the group, which will also be factored into the grade for the assignment.

- *Individual reflection:*
 1. Write a 2-3 page reflection (double-spaced, 12pt font, 1.25” margins) about your role in the group project. Please include:
 - What did you learn from this project?
 - From the research on the topic?
 - From working with your group?
 - What did you learn from the other posters?
 - What was successful, in your opinion, about the assignment?; what improvements could be made?

4. Bonus Points:

- This is an issues class and therefore we are interested in and concerned with topics that are in the news. You may acquire 5 bonus points toward your total grade in two ways:
 - Submit an article analysis, similar to the ones you have as class assignments, using a relevant current news article of your choice.
 - Please clear the choice of the article with me before you proceed
 - Attend a lecture whose content is relevant to the class and submit an analysis of the lecture, similar to the ones we will use for the lectures the class is asked to attend.
 - Present a short (5-8 minute) analysis of a relevant news article to the class, including:
 - its major focus (or foci)
 - the evidence it has provided
 - your assessment of its overall strengths and weaknesses.
Please clear the choice of article with me before you proceed (and so I might schedule a time for your presentation).
- For all our sanity’s sake, if you choose to do a bonus assignment, it must be done **before** the last two weeks of the semester.

Class Protocols:

1. *Attendance/participation:*
 - a. Participation is an important part of learning the material and the analytical skills we will practice in class, and attendance is a prerequisite for participation. I will take attendance periodically, but my real priority is in encouraging your engagement in the subject matter of the class—whether you agree *or* disagree. When I allocate participation points at the end of the semester, they increase with the amount that you contribute constructively to the class.

- b. If you must miss class, please contact me by email—and good reasons for missing a class are things like: debilitating, life-threatening or highly communicable diseases, or broken bones; official university or career activities; Or unavoidable serious family or personal crises. Bad reasons for missing class are: overslept; the arrival of new, large farm equipment; meeting a new significant other/fight with significant other/break-up with significant other; or simple disinclination.
 - c. There will be a few university lectures that you will be asked to attend that are outside normal class hours. I will cancel a regular class meeting to compensate you for each outside lecture.
 2. *Courtesy:*
 - a. Over the semester, we will be dealing with many issues and ideas that raise strong feelings and opinions—especially since the topics we discuss are an integral part of many of our lives and careers. One of the ground rules for the class therefore will be to approach the discussion of these issues with respect and with an open mind toward others' positions.
 - b. Your instructor has a severe nervous disorder (common to many university professors) that flares up when cell phones are not turned off, or when students read newspapers or books or carry on extended private conversations (or other related activities) during class. Please have respect for your fellow students and myself, and focus your attention on the subject matter for the day.
 3. *Participation in Group Activities:* There will be at least one important group activity during the semester for which you will need to schedule time to meet with your group. Your attendance, interest and work habits will be a part of this grade, as each group will rate all its members for participation and amount of work contributed. To facilitate this process, I will allot some class time for group meetings.
 4. *Late assignments:* If you cannot turn in your assignments at the scheduled time, contact me with your valid (see attendance) reasons before the due date, or you will be eligible only for a reduced number of the total points.
 5. *Plagiarism* and Academic Dishonesty:* Plagiarism and academic dishonesty are considered grounds for failing an assignment. The work you turn in, except in the case of group activities, is expected to be yours and yours alone. You know all this stuff already, but it is important enough to deserve a reminder.
 - *One is responsible for plagiarism when: the exact words of another writer are used without using quotation marks and indicating the source of the words; the words of another are summarized or paraphrased without giving the credit that is due; the ideas from another writer are borrowed without properly documenting their source. Acknowledging the sources of borrowed material is a simple, straightforward procedure that will strengthen your paper and assure its integrity. Any manual of style (such as the English 104-105 Student Manual) will give guidelines in documenting borrowed material.
 6. *Students with Disabilities:* Please address any special needs or special accommodations with me at the beginning of the semester or as soon as you become aware of your needs. Those seeking accommodations based on disabilities should obtain a Student Academic Accommodation Request (SAAR) from the Disability Resources (DR) office (515-294-6624), located on the main floor of the Student Services Building, Room 1076.