SENV 3410: Sustainability Practicum

This course will explore, through reading, discussion, and direct engagement, an issue associated with sustainability. Using a case study approach to analyzing sustainability initiatives in the local area, students will explore—and practice—the process of advancing a project from inception to launch. This class will involve team-based research projects focused on identifying and analyzing solutions to real sustainability challenges confronted by government, business, or individuals.

The course will also emphasize training in critical leadership skills, including project management, team building and team leading, persuasive communication, networking, conflict resolution, understanding diverse communication styles, human-centered design, and emotional intelligence.

**Instructors**

Catherine M. Ashcraft  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Natural Resources  
and the Environment  
University of New Hampshire

Stephen C. Trombulak  
Professor  
Program in Environmental Studies  
Middlebury College

**Community partner**

Jack Byrne  
Director of the Office of Sustainability Coordination  
Middlebury College

**Course structure**

This practicum will be roughly divided into three parts. In the first part, coming primarily during the first two weeks but continuing throughout the semester, we will emphasize readings that explore the history, themes, and critiques associated with the concept of sustainability as a foundational principle of environmental practice. During this first part we will also engage in a number of leadership workshops intended to help you develop the skills needed to envision and advance ideas for positive environmental change. We will also explore a number of tools that can be used for developing proactive approaches to envisioning and developing sustainable systems, in particular scenario planning and creative ideation through human-centered design.
In the second part, during Weeks 3-5, you will each work in a team of four students on a project aimed at answering the following question: What are the priorities and strategies for how Middlebury College should prepare for climate change? Middlebury College will serve as our template for how any community – be it a town, state, corporation, or ecoregion – can engage in scenario planning, systems analysis, and creative ideation both to define vulnerabilities and imagine strategies to strengthen society’s sustainability and resiliency.

Finally, during Week 6, each team will prepare a presentation of their ideas for a panel of judges, using the skills learned throughout the program on persuasive communication.

**Readings**

We will read and discuss all or parts of several books – each representing a different literary form, including fiction, creative non-fiction, and reflective essay, and interview – during the semester to better understand the breadth of this subject and the tools necessary to effect positive change. These include the following:

- *State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?* (Worldwatch Institute)
- *Creative Confidence* (Tom and David Kelley)
- *Flourishing* (John Ehrenfeld and Andrew Hoffman)
- *Odds Against Tomorrow: a novel* (Nathaniel Rich)

We will also read several articles and book excerpts on these themes, which will be made available as pdfs on the class Moodle site.

We also recommend the following book, although we will not focus on it in class:

- *Eaarth* (Bill McKibben)

**Assessment**

Assessment in this course will be of your engagement, project, and writing.

*Engagement.*—Each of you will be asked to perform a self-assessment of your engagement in all aspects of this class but especially of your role as a member of your project team. You will also be asked to perform an assessment of each member of your team. These assessments will be combined with those that the instructors perform on each student in the class. (35%)

*Project.*—The results of your team project will be assigned a grade. The instructors will evaluate the project while it is in process as well as the final product (with input from the panel of judges who observe the final presentations). (35%)
Writing.—Each week for Weeks 1-5, a reflective question will be posed to you regarding concepts and/or processes introduced in the course. The questions will be presented on the School’s blog, The Stream, and you will be asked to respond to each question as a comment to the blog post. (Thus, your responses will be visible to the general public, raising the bar for you when considering your answers.) In addition, we reserve the right to assign additional writing assignments, such as reaction papers, if we feel that students would benefit from a more structured environment for pre-discussion preparation. (30%)

Grading

Grades will be assigned on a straight percentage basis: 90-100% is an A, 80-89% is a B, 70-79% is a C, 60-69% is a D, and <60% is an F, with + and - grades assigned to high and low scores within those ranges.

Course Calendar

Week 1

Monday: Framework for “Sustainability”
- Flourishing: Ch 1 and 2
- Our Common Future, Ch 2: Towards Sustainable Development. Available at: [http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm](http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm)
- State of the World 2013: Ch 1: Beyond Sustainababble

Tuesday: The Structure of Systems
- State of World 2013: Ch 2: Regulating Planetary Boundaries and Reconnecting to the Biosphere
- State of the World 2013: Ch 3: Defining a Safe and Just Space for Humanity


Friday: The Behavior of Systems
- Creative Confidence: Ch 1 and 2

Week 2

Monday: Creative Ideation
- Creative Confidence: Ch 3 and 4
Tuesday: The Economic System

- *Flourishing*: Ch 3, 4, 5

Friday: Change

- *Flourishing*: Ch 6, 7, and 8
- The Story of Change (video). Available at: http://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-change/
- *State of World 2013*: Ch 23: Moving From Individual Change to Societal Change
- *State of World 2013*: Ch 4: Getting to One-Planet Living

Week 3

Monday: Practicum Project Development
Tuesday: Practicum Project Development  
Linkage discussion to issues of sustainability  
Friday: Practicum Project Development  
Linkage discussion to issues of sustainability

Readings for the week:
- Vermont Climate Assessment: Considering Vermont’s Future in a Changing Climate. Available at: http://vtclimate.org/publications/ (Monday)
- *Odds Against Tomorrow* (TBD)
- *Creative Confidence*: Ch 5 and 6

Week 4

Monday: Practicum Project Development
Tuesday: Practicum Project Development  
Linkage discussion to issues of sustainability  
Friday: Practicum Project Development  
Linkage discussion to issues of sustainability

Readings for the week:
- Excerpts from Middlebury College Master Plan and other college plans (Monday)
- *State of the World 2013*: Ch 25: Effective Crisis Governance
- *State of the World 2013*: Ch 26: Governance in the Long Emergency
• *State of the World 2013*: Ch 33: Shaping Community Responses to Catastrophe
• *State of the World 2013*: Ch 22: Pathways to Sustainability (TBD)
• Collaborative Policymaking: Governance through dialogue (Innes and Booher) (TBD)
• *Creative Confidence*: Ch 7 and 8

**Week 5**

Monday: Practicum Project Development
Tuesday: Practicum Project Development
Friday: Practicum Project Development

**Week 6**

Monday: Developing a Sustainability Charter
Tuesday: Practice for presentations
Wednesday afternoon: Final presentations