

Sustainable Food: Politics, Policy and Ethics (11:374:289), Spring 2026

Professor: Ethan Schoolman (Dept. of Human Ecology)

Mondays and Wednesdays 2:00 - 3:20 in Hickman Hall 205

Course Description

Walk through a grocery store, and the range of options for “eating ethically” can seem overwhelming. Organic, free-range, antibiotic-free, humanely-raised, local, fair trade, Jersey Fresh, GMO-free, grass-fed... the list goes on. Individual consumers and big organizations increasingly want their choices about food to reflect their values about sustainability, equality, and social justice. But as any philosopher will tell you, it’s not easy to know what our values obligate us to do. And where food is concerned, we don’t just want to feel good about making an “ethical” choice. We also want to know if our ethical choices are making a difference—if they are succeeding in making the world a better place.

In this course, we explore how “food systems” can be made more environmentally sustainable and socially just. Drawing on tools from social and environmental sciences, we examine how food systems impact both the natural environment, and the social wellbeing of everyone who interacts with food on its way from farm to table. We identify and scrutinize major laws and policies that shape contemporary food systems. And we study social movements—including organic, localization, fair trade, and food sovereignty—that seek to make fundamental changes in how food is produced and humans are fed. For each of these reform-minded social movements we ask: Where does it come from? What are its goals? What problems is it meant to solve? What is working—and what is not? Who is benefiting—and who is left out? And especially: Given the strengths and weaknesses of existing attempts to transform food systems, what should be the focus of the next generation of responsible, food-literate citizens—like the students in this class?

Course Learning Goals

Through taking this course, students will:

- Understand how food systems—from farming to food consumption—affect the natural environment and the social wellbeing of human communities;
- Understand how social trends and governance approaches have contributed to the current state of food systems, and explore how policies to govern food systems have evolved over time in response to changing priorities and political pressure;
- Understand the history, goals and limitations of contemporary social movements to make food systems more sustainable, and develop tools to evaluate how successful these attempts at reform have been;
- Build tools for effectively communicating their own thinking regarding policies and plans to make food systems more sustainable.

It is also noted that the overall goals of the undergraduate program in Environmental Policy, Institutions, and Behavior (EPIB) are:

- Students graduating from the major will understand and analyze the varied perspectives offered by the social and natural sciences regarding the causes and consequences of social, ecological, and environmental change.
- Students will acquire the skills to use appropriate conceptual and methodological tools to structure inquiries about human-environment interactions.
- Students will undertake their own work guided by ethical considerations

Readings

Most readings for this class are posted on Canvas, as PDFs or weblinks inside each module. Use the Class Schedule to know what to read, when. There are also two books which you are required to purchase or take out of the library for this class. You can get away with a digital copy *Food Policy in the United States* if you want (though you won't have it for in-class exams, since no computers are allowed), but you must purchase or borrow a hard copy of *Healing Grounds*.

The two books are:

- *Healing Grounds: Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming*, by Liz Carlisle. \$28 at [Little City Books](#) in Hoboken; \$26 on [Amazon](#).
- *Food Policy in the United States: An Introduction* (3rd edition), by Parke Wilde. \$54 at [Little City Books](#); \$43 on [Amazon](#).

Class Mechanics

Canvas

I use Canvas to post all course materials, including readings, lecture slides, and assignments. Please make sure you have access to the Canvas site for this course, and familiarize yourself with the various folders. Please also make sure that you have set your Notification options (under Account on the far left) to receive an alert (via email) when I post an Announcement, and, if you want, when I post new materials. It is your responsibility to do this! Otherwise, you may miss important information about the course.

Canvass is pretty well thought-out once you get the hang of it. Under the Files tab on the left, you can see the several folders I've made: *Readings*, *Assignments*, etc. The *Readings* folder here contains most of the readings for the entire course. But if you click on the Modules tab to the left, you can see where I've grouped things by Class Session. You'll still want to look at the Class Schedule (in the *Main Course Documents* module) to see what readings are assigned for what days. If this sounds a little confusing, don't worry, I'll go over it in class on the first day. And speaking of which...

Class Schedule

In addition to this Syllabus, I have created a separate PDF with the schedule of what topics we'll be covering in each lecture, what to read on what day, etc. You can find the Class Schedule in the *Main Course Documents* module on Canvas. Sometimes I add or subtract readings as the class goes along, but I will always announce on Canvas when I do this.

Office Hours

- I will be holding weekly office hours over Zoom on Mondays from 11-12:30. These aren't scheduled under Upcoming Meetings. At about 11 on Mondays, I will just open my Zoom room, and anyone who wants to can "drop by" using this link: <https://rutgers.zoom.us/my/es808> and the passcode 406218. If you can't make regular office hours, please get in touch with me and we'll figure out another time to talk.

Assignments and Grading

Students will be assessed on several things:

- *Class Participation*: 15% of the final course grade will be based on attendance and in-class participation. I understand and am sympathetic to the fact that people's participation styles are different. Everyone should do their best to verbally participate at least once a class. If there is anything you would like me to know about your participation style, please visit office hours asap so we can chat.
- *Mini-Case Study on a part of a modern food system*: 5% of the final course grade. This assignment comes up quick, so be ready!
- *Mini-Presentations*: 20% of the final course grade. Each student must do (at least) two of these over the course of the semester. Sign-up sheet is in the *Main Course Documents* module. When you have a presentation due, you are required to meet with the professor to go over your topic, and submit a summary and slides for what you will talk about before class.
- *Book Club Participation*: 15% of the final course grade. There will be four in-class meetings of book club over the course of the semester. The book we're reading is *Healing Grounds: Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming*. It is your responsibility to be at each meeting of book club, and to bring your book. If you miss one, you will need to write a proctored blue-book essay with me during office hours or before/after class.
- *Blue Book Exams*: 25% of the final course grade. There will be two of these during the semester. Exams will be handwritten and open-book, in that students may bring and consult course materials (books, articles) and handwritten or printed-out typed notes. No computers or devices allowed!
- *Presentation*: 20% of the final course grade. Each student will prepare and make a presentation according to the assignment at the end of class.

Final course letter grades will be awarded based on the following scale:

Course Grade	Minimum Points (out of 100)
A+	97

A	90
B+	87
B	80
C+	77
C	70
D	65
F	<65

Course Policies

Academic Integrity. DO YOUR OWN WORK! The point of college is to learn to do things yourself. This includes developing the skills to *judge* sources and use them properly. If you cheat or plagiarize, you will be investigated through the Rutgers Academic Integrity process and may fail the class.

Late Papers. We do not give extra credit assignments or accept revised papers for re-grading. Instead, have us read drafts of your work before it is due. Late assignments drop one step on the letter grade scale for each calendar day late (e.g., from a B to a C+, or from a B+ to a B).

Illness or Emergencies. *If you will miss a deadline or exam due to illness or emergency, notify us on or before the due date.* Send your recitation instructor and Dr. Schoolman an email (with “PEI” in the subject line) AND report your absence to: <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/>

Links to an external site..

Disabilities. Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. Please visit this webpage if you have not registered already: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. To begin this process, please complete the ODS Registration form: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>

Links to an external site..

Let me also say that I do my best to create an environment where all students can do their best work. If you need accommodations related to any kind of special condition or disability, please see me as soon as possible.

Learning Environment. Some of the topics we discuss may provoke debate. We ask that everyone treat each other with respect.

Student Wellness Services

Counseling, ADAP & Psychiatric Services (CAPS)

(848) 932-7884 / 17 Senior Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901/ www.rhscaps.rutgers.edu/

CAPS is a University mental health support service that includes counseling, alcohol and other drug assistance, and psychiatric services staffed by a team of professionals within Rutgers Health services to support students' efforts to succeed at Rutgers University. CAPS offers a variety of services that include individual therapy, group therapy and workshops, crisis intervention, referral to specialists in the community and consultation and collaboration with campus partners.

Violence Prevention & Victim Assistance (VPVA)

(848) 932-1181 / 3 Bartlett Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 / <https://vpva.rutgers.edu/>

The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance provides confidential crisis intervention, counseling, and advocacy for victims of sexual and relationship violence and stalking to students, staff, and faculty. To reach staff during office hours when the university is open or to reach an advocate after hours, call 848-932-1181.

Disability Services

(848) 445-6800 / Lucy Stone Hall, Suite A145, Livingston Campus, 54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Piscataway, NJ 08854 / <https://ods.rutgers.edu/>

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation:

<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodation. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration>.

DoSomething button through Rutgers Dean of Students office:

<http://health.rutgers.edu/do-something-to-help/>

Wellness Coaching through Rutgers HOPE:

<https://health.rutgers.edu/health-education-and-promotion/health-promotion-peer-education/wellness-coaching>

Self-Help Apps found on the Rutgers Student Health website:

<https://health.rutgers.edu/health-education-and-promotion/self-help/self-help-apps>

NJ Hopeline - (1-855-654-6735) | National Suicide Hotline - (1-800-273-8255)

Basic Needs Resources

Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, is urged to contact the Rutgers Student Food Pantry and/or the Dean of Students (details below). Furthermore, please notify the professor if you are comfortable doing so, as they may be able to provide additional support.

Rutgers Student Food Pantry

848-932-5500 / College Ave Student Center, Room 115 (126 College Ave) /
<http://ruoffcampus.rutgers.edu/food/>

Check their website for hours and additional locations. The Rutgers Student Food Pantry is dedicated to helping all Rutgers students in need of food, no questions asked. Students will be provided with groceries that typically last about one week.

Dean of Students Office

848-932-2300 / 88 College Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 /
<https://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu/>

Mon-Fri, 8:30am-5:00pm

The Dean of Students Office at Rutgers University-New Brunswick provides solutions, services, and support to help students navigate Rutgers University. The Office serves as a student support network by providing advocacy, problem resolution, and critical incident intervention for those times when additional assistance is needed. Please call to schedule an appointment to meet with a representative from the Dean's office.

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The university's policy on Academic Integrity is available at
<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy>

Links to an external site. The principles of academic integrity require that a student:

- properly acknowledge and cite all use of the ideas, results, or words of others.
- properly acknowledge all contributors to a given piece of work.
- make sure that all work submitted as his or her own in a course or other academic activity is produced without the aid of impermissible materials or impermissible collaboration.
- obtain all data or results by ethical means and report them accurately without suppressing any results inconsistent with his or her interpretation or conclusions.
- treat all other students in an ethical manner, respecting their integrity and right to pursue their educational goals without interference. This requires that a student neither facilitate academic dishonesty by others nor obstruct their academic progress.
- uphold the canons of the ethical or professional code of the profession for which he or she is preparing.

Adherence to these principles is necessary in order to ensure that

- everyone is given proper credit for his or her ideas, words, results, and other scholarly accomplishments.
- all student work is fairly evaluated and no student has an inappropriate advantage over others.
- the academic and ethical development of all students is fostered.
- the reputation of the University for integrity in its teaching, research, and scholarship is maintained and enhanced.

Failure to uphold these principles of academic integrity threatens both the reputation of the University and the value of the degrees awarded to its students. Every member of the University community therefore bears a responsibility for ensuring that the highest standards of academic integrity are upheld.