Sustainability Course Redesign
English 395: Writing for the Health Professions
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My course redesign creates opportunities for students to pursue research and writing projects that examine how public health and sustainability issues are deeply interrelated. Course readings during the first three weeks will help students begin to see how these issues are connected and also to arrive at working definitions of “sustainability” and “public health.” These readings, discussions, and an exploratory essay written during the first three weeks will set up the rest of the course, in which students will pursue semester-long, collaborative research and writing projects that identify, explore, define, and propose and test solutions to a public health problem that concerns sustainability issues.

The first three weeks of the course will feature readings, videos, discussions, and shorter writing projects to help students begin to examine public health issues that interest or concern them through the lens of sustainability theory. I have selected readings and videos that speak to five sustainability “Big Ideas’” in particular: interconnectedness and interdependence, three-part good governance, and systems thinking; food security; and health equity. I will draw some of our readings from the Northwest Earth Institute’s *Choices for Sustainable Living* book, including “Systems Thinking” (pp. 26-28), which introduces students to a model for broadening their perspective on particular topics, activities, or problems that interest them and analyzing how these topics, activities, problems might link to other social and ecological systems; “Definitions of Sustainability” (p. 15); and “The Ecology of Disease,” by Jim Robbins (pp. 44-49). This last reading, I believe, clearly highlights the connections between sustainability and public health concerns; Robbins’ attention to the emergence, spread, treatment, forecasting, and prevention of disease will be of great interest to many students in the Writing for the Health Professions course. I will also include readings from section 1, “Redefining Health,” of the Northwest Earth Institute’s *A World of Health: Connecting People, Place, and Planet* booklet:

- Carolyn Raffensperger, “The Diagnosis of the Unknown Physician” (pp. 11-12)
- Lee Thirer, “Beyond the Patient” (pp. 12-13)
- Kenny Ausubel, “The Coming Age of Ecological Medicine” (pp. 14-16)
- Sandra Steingraber, “The Rabies Principle” (pp. 17-18).

Our discussions of these texts will focus on examining and revising our definitions of “health” from one that focuses on the well-being of the individual or even a community to one that attends to the intimate relationship between humans’ health and the health of the environments in which we live.

After we read and discuss these readings aimed at helping us to see how public health and sustainability concerns are often intimately related, we will turn our attention to local examples of pressing public health concerns whose origins and solutions also relate to the building of sustainable communities. In particular we will examine these five issues:

1. The current state of pollution, habitat, and fisheries in the Chesapeake Bay, as well as analysis of how these qualities influence the health of those people who live within its 64,000-square mile watershed. Here we will read the Chesapeake Bay Foundation’s 2012 *State of the Bay* report as well as a 2000 journal article co-
authored by Thomas A. Burke, Jill S. Litt, and Mary A. Fox entitled “Linking Public Health and the Health of the Chesapeake Bay” (Environmental Research 82 [2000]:143-149).

2. Work emerging from the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative, particularly efforts to map the city’s food environment and eliminate food deserts (http://archive.baltimorecity.gov/Government/AgenciesDepartments/Planning/BaltimoreFoodPolicyInitiative.aspx)

3. Maryland’s Homegrown School Lunch and Farm-to-School programs, which aims not only to bring locally produced food into school cafeterias, which both increases the range of healthy food options for students and improves economic opportunities for the state’s farmers, but also to integrate agricultural and food-related education in the classroom curriculum (http://www.mda.maryland.gov/farm_to_school/Pages/farm_to_school.aspx)

4. The grassroots Maryland Pesticide Network that has been campaigning to create a centralized, online database of pesticide use in the state: (http://www.mdpestnet.org).

5. Governmental, academic, and community efforts to create comprehensive strategies and solutions to improve public and environmental health in Prince George’s County. In particular we will read selections from the July 2012 report published by the University of Maryland School of Public Health entitled Transforming Health in Prince George’s County, Maryland: A Public Health Impact Study. (http://sph.umd.edu/princegeorgeshealth/SPH_ImpactStudy_fullreport.pdf) as well as selections from the Prince George’s County Health Department’s Prince George’s County Health Report 2014, Prince George’s County Health Improvement Plan 2011 to 2014, and Prince George’s County Health Action Plan 2012. While these documents are comprehensive, we will focus in particular on how these reports prioritize ensuring that the county’s physical and social environments are safe and support health.

My intention in assigning these types of texts for reading and discussion is to help students begin to see how they can and should narrow the focus for their semester-long research and writing projects by localizing their topics. As we discuss these texts, too, I will make sure that we attend not only to the solutions that groups have designed and, in some cases, implemented but also the specific nature of the problems that these solutions have been designed to address.

This attention to deeply understanding and precisely defining problems before creating and analyzing solutions to them has led me to partner with the university’s Academy for Entrepreneurship and Innovation for this course as well. I will be working specifically with Ms. Erica Estrada-Liou, adjunct faculty for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, who will lead an in-class workshop that introduces students to key concepts and processes at the heart of “design thinking.” This design thinking process has led me to create a new sequence of writing projects for the course.

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<tr>
<th>Design Process Step</th>
<th>ENGL 395 Writing Project(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Empathize</td>
<td>A. Exploring an Issue (I)</td>
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<td>B. Analyzing Stakeholders (I)</td>
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Abbreviations: I = Individually authored project. C = Collaboratively authored project.

Integrating this design thinking component into English 395 has been a priority for me in order to address a problem I see in many Professional Writing courses where students very early in the semester pick both a problem they want to solve and a solution they want to argue for in their research and writing projects. These students do not spend enough time thoroughly analyzing and defining the problem before creating and analyzing solutions to the problem. Instead, students spend more of their semester in search of research to support their solutions or to delegitimize alternative solutions rather than pursuing research that helps them to understand the problem in greater depth and sharper clarity and pursuing problem-solving strategies that help them to create innovative solutions that address the depth and breadth of the problem.

This sustainability focus and this design approach to problem-solving will come together in the students’ work on their semester-long research & writing projects. Near the end of the first three weeks of reading and discussing how public health is linked to sustainability, students will compose a 2- to 3-page exploratory essay where they discuss their particular areas of interest in health or medicine and use a systems-thinking heuristic (Choices for Sustainable Living, p. 27) to examine ways that the issue links to sustainability concerns. I will read and respond to these essays in advance of conferencing with students individually during the fourth week of class. Professional Writing Program instructors are required to conference with each student at least once per semester, and I will use my conferences with students at the topic selection stage in order to help students sharpen and clarify their explanation of how their public health concern relates to sustainability. This initial sharpening of their topics will then set up students to begin forming groups based on common interests and academic, extracurricular, internship, or professional experiences, groups they will work with throughout the semester to collaboratively research and write their sequences of major writing projects, projects that ask them to analyze a public health problem in depth, brainstorm potential solutions to the problem, and then carefully evaluate the solutions and recommend one for implementation.