1. INTRODUCTION

This course sheds light on and sets in perspective the larger question of both knowledge and human choices around sustainability. This class is designed to create an intellectual space to discuss the perspectives on sustainability other than rationalized scientific knowledge that dominates the academia today. While being aware of the limitation of the dominant model of knowledge production, the readings in class presses home the need for alternative perspectives on knowledge systems. This brings us to our core questions: How can today’s knowledge systems that are locked-in across various cultures and traditions be harnessed to gain useful insights for efforts to navigate a transition toward sustainability? What can we learn from other cultures and their views on/of/for sustainability? How do they imagine sustainability within the context of their location, history, social and cultural values? How can we communicate their imagination in ways that complement what is currently discussed about sustainability?

I strongly believe that the discourse on sustainability is enriched when it includes ways of knowing that are embedded in the cultural and social fabric of life in a specific locale. Most importantly, through readings and discussion, this class will frame the idea that sustainability is not a problem that can be solved by technological fixes and market economy alone. We will examine case studies of knowledge systems embedded in different cultures, as well as attempt to develop a general conceptual framework that goes beyond the current and dominant discourse, with its exclusively political, scientific and rational considerations.

The class will be conducted as a seminar whereby students are expected to engage actively in all class activities. While I welcome disagreements emerging from different worldviews, I also want to see constructive ways to approach how we tackle differences and reflect on some of the social implications of this phenomenon. Logically, then, your involvement is crucial through participation in class as well as framing of issues through written commentaries that stimulate discussions. I welcome approaches from students seeking to further their knowledge in any area of sustainability inquiry.

For the purpose of advancing the overarching theme of this class, I have identified thematic areas and framed them within the context of cultures and values that have not hereto been part of the mainstream discourse on sustainability. Over the course of the semester, through discussions and deliberation, this class will create an opportunity for all of us to engage in sustainability from multiple but complementary perspectives and inform individual research from a different vantage point. In doing so this class also illuminate the numerous ways in which the idea of sustainability can be deployed in public and private spheres. The class therefore is collective
exercise for both the faculty and students in challenging the current form of knowing and proposing alternative one complementing the goals of attaining sustainability.

1. LEARNING OUTCOMES

By introducing social and cultural perspectives on/of sustainability this cross-disciplinary class will:

a. Explore the complexity, plurality and opportunities in tackling impending challenge of sustainability from a vantage point of social sciences;

b. Understand how knowledge of sustainability sciences is constructed and reinforced;

c. Understand how the plurality of knowledge systems help maintain social, cultural, and ecological harmony;

d. Explore intersection among values, ethics, justice, and social norms that might have implication to action on sustainability;

e. Understand that solutions to sustainability must include measures to address issues of poverty, equity, education, and justice;

f. Debate the appropriate role for science in guiding policy on sustainability and response strategies;

3. ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

a. Attendance and participation (20% of course grade): This class emphasizes participatory learning and relies on your ability to understand the assigned readings and engagement in discussion of those readings in class. You are expected to attend the class ready to discuss the materials of the week. Obviously this means you will be assessed based on the quality and the depth of your discussion in class. Only one absence will be excused.

b. Weekly commentaries (20% of course grade): In order to facilitate productive discussion each student must write brief commentaries (up to 500 words) highlighting the key issues and questions from the week’s readings starting WEEK TWO. Please make sure to post your commentaries in the Blackboard (Written Commentaries) by Wednesday morning (10 am). The commentaries should outline the central concept of the reading(s) and common thread running across them, critically evaluate them in relation to overall theme of the class, and pose thought provoking questions for discussion to stimulates discussion. When writing commentaries try to elevate your thinking a step or two beyond the reading materials of the week. Where possible make connection to previously covered materials or your experience of the real-world situations. Your larger purpose is to show that in spite of all this wonderful research, no one has addressed the problem in the way that you have envisioned. This gives your commentaries a purpose, and even a thesis of sorts.

c. Moderating a session (10% of course grade): During a semester you will be asked to moderate a class discussion (randomly assigned). You are the “expert” of that week’s theme – so act like one. You may want to go beyond the readings that are assigned for the week. Think of yourself as Diane Rehm (moderator) of the Diane Rehm Show, which is produced by NPR member station WAMU 88.5 and distributed nationally by NPR. Here is what I suggest:

- As a moderator you are expected to guide the conversation in a lively manner;
- Explain the class how you going to proceed and what is expected;
- Thoroughly read and react on the written commentaries of the week;
- Where possible pick-up discussion thread(s) from the commentaries;
• You may also bring your own experience and knowledge from other classes;
• You should have innate sense of pacing yourself such as how long you should dedicate to each discussion thread before moving to another;
• You also have the authority to politely cut off or redirect the speaker if they stray; and
• Creativity and enthusiasm will be noted.

d: Picture Project (10% of course grade): There is no one elegant solutions to sustainability. People have different and mutually irreconcilable ideas of just what is sustainable and what is not. The members of the Sierra Club, for instance, see pretty well all human activity as unsustainable. Others see little to worry about, reassuring one another that "If something is unsustainable it will stop". Yet others – those who speak of "safe limits"- discern a boundary line between those interventions that nature can cope with and those lead to collapse. Sorting out these conflicting views is a challenge. How do the social and cultural contexts shape these views? To answer this question I want you to design a creative picture project. It should be fun.

As part of the project I want you to take three photos or brief (1-2 minutes) film clips that record images that represent dimensions of sustainability (e.g. a recycling bin on campus, farmers market, urban garden). Each image (or video clip) should be accompanied by a brief (around 250 words each) explanation of the image and how it relates to one of the points below. A link will be set up for posting on the Blackboard site under Picture Project.

• Picture 1: an image that encapsulates the ideals of sustainability. It could also reflect different viewpoints about sustainability.
• Picture 2: an image that goes against the idea of sustainability. But that must be explained in the short narrative
• Picture 3: an image that challenges the orthodoxy around the sustainability. For example current development practices going against the value of sustainable development.

e. Case study (40% of course grade): This class relies on case studies to illustrate the record of good practices (failure) or innovation to range of challenges related to sustainability. The goal is to provide an example of a better understanding of the contribution of cultural and societal values to sustainability such as identifying lessons and best practices (or failure) from past responses to such occurrences. There are four parts to this project: identification of case study, extended abstract (approximately 500 words), presentation of case study in class, and final paper. They are due at different times of the semester.

• Identification of case study (due September 17) – choose a case study that is within the area of your research interest. If you have problem of identifying one – please discuss with me.
• Extended abstract (due October 15) - This should include the title (self-explanatory and expressed as a normative question that encapsulates the perspectives on sustainability), short introduction to your case study, justification, your methods of inquiry and if possible data source(s).
• Presentation of case study in class (due December 3) – you are required to share the findings of your semester long research on the case study of your choice.
• Final paper (10 page double-spaced, 12-point font plus figures, notes and references, (due December 7) should be written in such as way that it; a) captures the complexity of
sustainability response, b) appeals to a broad audience; and c) provides lessons for possible response to challenges to sustainability.

- Note that the final paper should explore ideas around sustainability, social and cultural dimensions, and competing worldviews around the issues of sustainability. The theoretical framework and multiple threads that will be discussed in class may be a useful way to think about the content of the paper.

- It is important that you do a thorough proofreading of your final paper (more than once). Relying solely on spelling and grammar check on your word processor may not be a wise idea. Also, make sure to properly cite all the reference papers – inappropriate citation may cost you points. With regard to style and grammar, your writing should, above all, be clear and correct.