

Introduction to Agroecology & Community Engagement

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“Action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us.” –Robin Wall Kimmerer

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” – John Dewey



Course Description

Young people entering higher education face a uniquely challenging set of social, economic, and environmental crises, and are eager to find ways to make a difference. At UVM, and in Vermont more broadly, reimagining the food system has become an avenue for meaningful and generative ways to tackle these issues. **With an emphasis on community engagement in an academic context, this course introduces students to agroecology** – an interdisciplinary approach to agriculture and food systems that works to build healthy, sustainable, and just human and environmental ecosystems. After participating in this course, students will not only have a strong grounding in agroecology and food systems, but also will be uniquely positioned to navigate the UVM landscape, to engage with community partners and organizations, to connect with Vermont as a source of learning, and to explore their role in meaningful social and environmental change.

Course Format & Schedule

This course meets in person at UVM (Burlington, VT) during the first two weeks of July; students will complete the course online during the final two weeks of July. The in-person meetings will be four days each week, or 8 in-person days total.

Each in-person day will consist of an overarching theme that will guide learning (though in practice these themes are all interrelated and will resurface over and over). Each day will also include site visits and/or other form of engagement with community partners and UVM stakeholders. The days' themes are:

- Day 1: Introduction To Agroecology, Community Engagement, & This Course
- Day 2: Soil Health
- Day 3: Water & Watersheds
- Day 4: Biodiversity
- Day 5: Climate Change & Adaptation
- Day 6: Policy & Governance
- Day 7: Rural Livelihoods, Labor & Land Access
- Day 8: Healthy Food Access & Food Sovereignty

The last two weeks of July will be conducted remotely (and asynchronously). During this time students will complete additional readings & assignments, and connect course content to their home context. Students will continue to engage with each other's work and ideas, though not always in real time.

Agroecology

Agroecology can serve as a meaningful entry point to positive social and environmental change—whether a student's interest lies in a stable climate and unpolluted environment, strong and vibrant local communities, social and economic justice, or individual and public health.

Agroecology as science, practice, & movement

Broadly speaking, agroecology is often categorized into three interrelated but distinct approaches: science, practice, and social movement:

- ***Science***: *the academic research that underpins the field*. At UVM, the Agroecology Institute has a long-standing commitment to engaged scholarship and participatory action research (PAR) in agroecology and food systems. In its simplest form, the AI sees PAR as “doing research with people, for people.” Students in this course will learn about some of the agroecological research projects being conducted by UVM professors and graduate students in collaboration with their community partners.
- ***Practice***: *the agroecological methods employed by food producers and communities*. Practices are often based on a combination of academic research and traditional or community-based knowledge. Students will explore, particularly during site visits, some of the practices being used to build healthy agroecosystems locally — a variety of different practical approaches to improving soil health, expanding biodiversity, maintaining clean air and water, and other environmentally beneficial agricultural and food production practices.

- **Movement:** *the organized call for healthy and just food systems as both mechanism for, and outcome of, social change.* Developing social, cultural, and political structures and that help ensure food sovereignty, promote social and environmental justice, and honor traditional knowledge and wisdom. Students will engage with healthy and culturally appropriate food access, farmworker rights, local food economies, policy and governance, access to and use of land, and sharing of natural resources, among others.

Agroecological Elements

Though agroecology has been defined quite differently and unevenly over space and time, there are some generally agreed upon common elements in the field, which will serve as a useful lens through which to view the component parts of the food system:

At the farm level:

- Resilience
- Diversity
- Synergies
- Efficiency
- Recycling

At the community level:

- Human & social values
- Co-creation & sharing of knowledge
- Cultural & food traditions
- Circular & solidarity economy
- Responsible governance

Agroecology is an inherently transdisciplinary field, and one which explores and interacts with the wildly complex global food system. While the topic is too big to address comprehensively in a single introductory experience, this course will nonetheless strive to embrace agroecology's complexity. Studying this topic can help students absorb in depth some of what makes Vermont a unique place, and how that local character connects with broader sets of issues and global structures.

Community Engagement

While thematically focused on agroecology and local food systems, the course simultaneously introduces students to community engagement, and UVM's agroecological partners and programs. Community-engaged learning allows students to apply classroom learning in a real-world context; students broaden perspectives and develop professional skills through an experience that considers community needs and priorities. This course is designed to provide students with a strong foundation for their emerging academic careers by familiarizing them with:

- *The UVM ecosystem:* some of the departments, professors, graduate students, institutes, research agendas, and courses associated with agroecological food systems;
- *Community-engaged learning:* how UVM coursework and research overlaps and interacts with community partners and their real-world work in food systems, and how students can engage in reciprocal partnership with those efforts. If the opportunity arises, students may even engage in one or more meaningful service-learning projects.
- *Vermont as place:* the working landscapes, ecosystems, people, and communities that shape (and are shaped by) local food systems;

- *Civic participation*: considering different avenues for social change (i.e. political, behavioral, systemic, personal, etc.); and exploring how to find one's role in civic life.

Pedagogical approach

In addition to readings, discussions, and assignments, this course will include a number of more atypical elements. Much of the learning will be experiential, project-based, community-engaged, and personal. We will seek a diversity of perspectives and lived experiences — both in our readings and through the people we meet — and will engage in extensive critical reflection. Our community partners will serve as both experts and supports. All of this will require flexibility from everybody involved, and a willingness to embrace variety and complexity.

This is an interdisciplinary course, including material drawn from social science, education, environmental studies, arts & humanities, and others. Given the diversity of experience and perspective of students in this class, students may be quite familiar with some concepts and material, while less fluent or comfortable with others. Please consider this as an opportunity to share your own strengths, while pushing yourself to expand your knowledge in new ways.

As much as our learning will be focused externally on the people and places that make up our local communities, we will likewise spend time practicing critical reflection. This will allow students to share personal histories and stories, explore identities and social positions, practice leadership, and connect the learning to their own experiences. Through consistent critical reflection, students in this course will be challenged to consider the intersection of complex agroecological systems, social issues, and individual and collective identities. Reflection will be built into all aspects of the course, and will be assessed based on the extent to which students approach new (and potentially challenging) material and experiences with openness and genuine effort, as well as their ability to evaluate and synthesize various data, information, and experiences.

Reading Materials

There are no textbooks to purchase for this course. Required readings will be electronic and posted to Blackboard. Additional handouts and other materials may be distributed in hard copy.

Our Common Ground

Students from all backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences are welcome; we value each student and their unique collection of ideas and identities. We ask that all participants in this course show respect to themselves, their peers, and the people we meet in the communities we enter. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, gender, sexuality, or any other identity or set of identities will not be condoned or tolerated.

This course will also strive to highlight a diversity of identities and perspectives in the assigned materials and the people we meet. Our educational system has historically privileged a small subset of voices and perspectives, and in this course we will seek to broaden the lens through which we see the world. That said, we all carry blind spots and unconscious biases, instructors very much included; we welcome ideas

about how a diversity of viewpoints and identities can be more fully represented. We will also co-create a set of community norms that will guide our discussions and ensure a safe place in which we can speak honestly and openly.

Learning Accommodations

This course is designed to appeal to different styles of learners and academic skillsets. Certain activities may be particularly difficult for students, whether due to disability, learning differences, circumstances at home, or other challenges. Students are encouraged to discuss the need for learning accommodations at any time, and we will work to create a plan for adjusting and/or making up learning activities that prove difficult.