

# Special Academic Initiative: Food for Thought

Where does our food come from? Most of us can provide little more of an answer than "from the grocery store." Yet media headlines and public debates often emphasize pressing issues involving food, from eating disorders and mad cow disease to genetically modified food and threats of ecoterrorism. Increasingly, it has become difficult and even unwise to take for granted the foods that we eat.

Understanding our food sources raises many questions of national and global significance. How will rising petroleum costs affect the availability and cost of food? What is the impact of current farming practices on the environment? How do the cultural meanings we associate with food influence eating habits? Does the loss of small landholding farmers diminish the foundation of a democratic society?

Food-related issues are particularly salient in the local community, a region rich in agriculture as a way of life and a basis of the economy. For example, the shift toward industrial agriculture has made it difficult for family farmers to compete in the global marketplace; a number of Kenyon employees hold jobs at the College in order to provide the income necessary to keep their farms financially viable. As aging farmers sell out to developers, the cornfields and livestock pastures that mark a rural landscape soon give way to residential sprawl and strip malls.

Food for Thought is a special initiative to explore food, farming, and rural life. As the accompanying list of courses suggests, these subjects touch virtually every aspect of the curriculum. For students, taking several of these courses represents an opportunity both to enrich understanding and to forge the cross-disciplinary connections that are central to liberal education. Many of these courses offer the additional opportunity to engage the surrounding community through original scholarly and creative work, broadening students' horizons beyond Gambier Hill and deepening their connection to this place.

Much of the work accomplished in these courses will contribute to an ambitious public project to build a sustainable market for foods produced in and around Knox County. Students and faculty are conducting research on local food supplies and consumer buying habits, developing a local food warehouse and retail outlet in Mount Vernon, and creating exhibits to raise public understanding about the many ways our food choices affect us as individuals and as a society.

For additional information about Food for Thought, visit the Kenyon Rural Life Center Web site at <http://rurallife.kenyon.edu>. To learn more about becoming involved in this initiative, contact Professor Howard Sacks, director of the Rural Life Center.

## **CERTIFICATE IN ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE**

The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA)-Kenyon Certificate Program in Ecological Agriculture gives students the opportunity to develop intellectual skills and practical knowledge regarding food and farming systems. Students will (1) develop an understanding of the complex nature of agroecosystems, (2) critically analyze the social, political, and economic institutions in which food and

farming systems are embedded, and (3) explore the interplay of social values, personal responsibility, and the achievement of environmental and community goals.

To earn a certificate in ecological agriculture, students must complete three relevant courses and undertake a ten-week summer internship on a farm that uses ecological production methods. These two core elements will be enhanced by additional program components, including participation in workshops and conferences. Each participating student will be eligible to be named an OEFFA Campus Fellow, a position that supports work with the community food system and fosters leadership development.

Participating students earn \$2,500 during their internship and receive a housing allowance, if needed. To apply for the program, contact Professor Sacks or any of the faculty listed below.

## **COURSES**

Each of these courses addresses themes relevant to Food for Thought. In some cases, the subject matter is central to the entire course; in others, it represents a distinct unit. Please refer to the brief description accompanying each listing, which notes the particular topics examined in the course. Complete course descriptions may be found in the listings for each department or program. For additional information, please contact the relevant faculty member. Independent study and summer research offer additional opportunities for academic work; see Professor Sacks for details.

### **ANTH 320 Anthropology of Food**

Credit: .5 unit

Through cross-cultural comparisons, this course investigates the central role food plays in human biology and culture, including the effects of social, political, and economic issues on human nutrition.

### **ARTS 106 Photography I**

Credit: .5 unit

Students will work on food-related issues for a photography project.

### **ARTS 320 Color Photography**

Credit: .5 unit

Food and culture, food politics, land use, and environmental issues will comprise a photography project; students may pursue additional projects addressing these themes.

### **BIOL 261 Animal Behavior**

Credit: .5 unit

Students observe and quantify behavior of farm animals at local farms involved in sustainable agriculture.

### **CHEM 108 Solar Energy**

Credit: .5 unit

Modern agricultural methods are heavily dependent on petroleum and natural gas; this course explores our global energy challenges from fossil fuels to solar energy alternatives.

**ECON 366 Environmental Economics**

Credit: .5 unit

In this course we will examine the economic rationale for agricultural practices and policies aimed at improving the quality of the environment and altering our use of natural resources.

**ENVS 112 Introduction to Environmental Studies**

Credit: .5 unit

This course examines sustainable development, particularly sustainable agriculture, as an important component of our general investigation of the effects of human population size on the environment.

**ENVS 253 Sustainable Agriculture**

Credit: .5 unit

Students will work five hours a week on a local farm and meet weekly with the instructor to discuss readings and their farm experience.

**ENVS 461 Seminar in Environmental Studies**

Credit: .5 unit

A portion of this class will be devoted to exploring patterns of changing land-use, including the conversion of agricultural land to suburban and commercial development, and how this leads to a host of environmental effects including loss of biodiversity, changes in soil quality, and a breakdown of the rural community.

**HIST 481 Feast, Fast, Famine**

Credit: .5 unit

This course explores the cultural, economic, and ecological significance of food in premodern Europe, touching on topics ranging from the religious significance of food, to medieval women, to the economic and demographic consequences of famine.

**PHIL 115 Practical Issues in Ethics**

Credit: .5 unit

Factory farming, vegetarianism, and the ecology of rural life are among the ethical issues discussed in the course.

**PSYC 443 Psychology of Eating Disorders**

Credit: .5 unit

This course examines, from a range of perspectives (e.g., genetic, psychological, feminist sociocultural, cross-cultural), how our relationships with food, eating, and weight management develop into the spectrum of biopsychosocial problems that we call "eating disorders."

**RLST 382 Prophecy**

Credit: .5 unit

This course will devote two sections to discussion of agribusiness and globalization and their impact on food, farming, and rural life both in America and abroad.

**SOCY 104 Identity in American Society**

Credit: .5 unit

The course focuses on rural life in examining issues of identity and society in contemporary America.

**SOCY 233 Sociology of Food**

Credit: .5 unit

This course examines the social world we live in by examining what we eat, how we eat it, where we buy it, how much it costs, who prepares it, who produces it, and how.

**SOCY 234 Community**

Credit: .5 unit

This course examines the changing character of rural community life, paying particular attention to Knox County, Ohio.

**SOCY 477Y, 478Y Fieldwork: Rural Life**

Credit: 1 unit

Students will conduct fieldwork throughout Knox County to examine the character of local food production and rural community life.