

## Community Engagement for Environmental Action

NRE1250 Section 001 (1 credit)

Spring Semester 2025

Wednesday, 4:40 – 5:30 pm

In-Person Young Building (YNG) 138

**Instructor:** Laura Cisneros, PhD  
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Office hours: By appointment

### Course

**Description:** This course provides introduction to equitable and inclusive community engagement practices that support community-based environmental efforts addressing socio-environmental issues. The course is open to students from diverse majors that have an interest in these topics:

- Introduction to socio-environmental justice issues relevant to Connecticut communities
- Principles of authentic community engagement
- EE approaches that promote collective environmental action
- Critical community science
- Culturally sustaining EE and trauma informed mentorship approaches
- Instinctual leadership & leading for change

### Post-Course Opportunity:

Undergraduate students enrolled in this course will have the opportunity to apply for 10-month paid environmental education leadership positions through the Natural Resources Conservation Academy (NRCA; <https://nrca.uconn.edu/>), as NRCA Difference Maker Mentors (<https://nrca.uconn.edu/dmm/>). Four undergraduate NRCA Difference Maker Mentors (DMMs) will serve as program leaders and near-peer mentors for the NRCA Conservation Ambassador Program (<https://nrca.uconn.edu/cap/>). Under the support and guidance of NRCA faculty and a graduate student, DMMs will have the unique opportunity to co-facilitate the summer field experience (July) and mentor a subset of teen participants during their community-based environmental action project in the following months (August to April). This opportunity will provide students with experience with leadership, authentic community engagement, environmental education, mentorship, and implementation of on-the-ground projects. This position will provide professional development in soft skills (e.g., building relationships, teamwork, communication) that are critical for workforce success.

### Course Format:

Students will be expected to come prepared for each class period by reading or viewing materials and writing short responses to discussion prompts prior to class. Students will submit their written responses at the beginning of class and be encouraged to discuss the prompts in class. Lectures will be used to supplement the class material.

## Course

### Format:

As some of the coursework will be collaborative (*Culturally Sustaining & Critical Community Science Team Project*), students will need to demonstrate a willingness to compromise and will be expected to treat their fellow team members with patience and respect. Students will complete both peer and self-evaluations as part of their team project. These evaluations will count towards the assessment of the project work. While a couple of class sessions are dedicated to project work time, students must also be prepared to meet with their teammates outside of scheduled class times. All team members must be active throughout project development and must be present for meetings outside of class sessions, even if their portion of the project is complete.

## Learning

### Objectives:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Recall ten culturally sustaining and trauma informed instructional and mentorship approaches.
- Describe essential components of critical community science efforts.
- Discuss and critically reflect on approaches and practices that may or may not facilitate authentic community engagement, inclusive and culturally sustaining environmental education, and collective environmental action.
- Work collaboratively to plan and develop *Culturally Sustaining & Critical Community Science Project* that could be implemented within the context of a specific Connecticut community.

## Readings &

### Viewings:

Supplementary readings and videos will be used throughout the class and open-source materials will be provided through [HuskyCT](#).

## Assignments:

***I Am From... Poem***—Students will have 1-2 minutes to share their I Am From ... Poem based on their self-being or identities, cultures, community, and lived experiences. *Each student will present during one presentation slot (2-3 slots at the beginning of each class) as well as turn in a hard copy of their poem.*

***Discussion Prompt Responses***—Discussion prompts/questions will be provided with class reading/viewing materials one week before the class period in which they are due. Students will be expected to read or view materials and write short responses to the discussion prompts and submit their written responses at the beginning of the class period. *Please note a hard copy of the responses to discussion prompts will be turned in within the first 5 minutes of the class period to be eligible for full credit.*

***Culturally Sustaining & Critical Community Science Project Team Project***—Each student team will design a *Culturally Sustaining & Critical Community Science Project* to address a socio-environmental justice phenomenon within the context of a specific Connecticut community. Each team will engage in a step-by-step guide that will be similar to one used by NRCA Conservation Ambassador Program teens, community partners, and near-peer mentors to develop community environmental action projects. During class presentations, each team will guide classmates in how the project focus and design were informed by six dimensions of a critical community science tool (i.e., community assets/hazards, representation & membership, histories, science knowledge, ways of being, and futures), the steps needed for implementation of the project (i.e., methods, partnerships, resources needed), and potential community impacts. *A separate detailed guideline outlining multiple components of the team project will be provided.*

**Grading:** A ≥ 95%; A- 90-94; B+ 87-89; B 83-86; B- 80-82; C+ 77-79; C 73-76; C- 70-72; D+ 67-69; D 63-66; D- 60-62; F < 60

Assignment	Points	% Grade	Due Date
<b>I Am From... Poem Activity</b> In-Class Share (10pts)	10	5	<b>Beginning of One Class Period</b> <i>(sign-up sheet will be provided)</i>
<b>Discussion Prompt Responses</b> Submitted Responses (10pts each)	70	35	<b>Weekly</b> <i>(for 7 select weeks)</i>
<b>Team Project</b>			
<b>Part 1:</b> Rationale for Socio-Environmental Focus <i>(based on asset mapping &amp; critical community science prompts)</i>	10	5	<b>March 5</b>
<b>Part 2:</b> Concept Pitch of 2 Project Ideas	30	15	<b>April 2</b>
<b>Part 3:</b> First Version of Culturally Sustaining & Critical Community Science Project	40	20	<b>April 16</b>
<b>Part 4:</b> Final Version of Culturally Sustaining & Critical Community Science Project	40	20	<b>April 30</b>

**Schedule:** This is a guideline—changes will be announced in class or on HuskyCT.

Date	Activity	Readings/Viewings & Assignments Due
<b>22 Jan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction to Course &amp; NRCA Difference Maker Mentor Opportunity</li> <li>Critical Community-Based Principles &amp; Stances of Course</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Sign Up for I AM From... Poem (sign up during class period)</i></li> </ul>
<b>29 Jan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overview of Socio-Environmental Justice &amp; Relevance to Community Engagement</li> <li>Building Community Agreements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Esri Story Maps (2020) The Lines that Shape Our Cities</li> <li>Jones (2021) An Invitation to Brave Spaces, Holding Change</li> <li>Holman (2019) Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces, &amp; Why We Gon Be Alright</li> <li>Equity Lab (2020) REDI Agreements</li> <li><i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> </ul>
<b>5 Feb</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Debrief Community Agreements</li> <li>Intro to Place-Based (Community) Environmental Action</li> <li>Save the Sound Fair Haven Photo Voice Example</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Krasny (2020) Collective Environmental Action, Advancing Environmental Education Outcomes</li> <li>Save the Sound (2022) Fair Haven PhotoVoice Website</li> <li>Save the Sound (2022) Fair Haven PhotoVoice StoryMap</li> <li><i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> </ul>

<b>12 Feb</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Debrief Save the Sound Fair Haven Photo Voice Example</li> <li>● Community Assets &amp; Hazards Mapping</li> <li>● Culturally Sustaining &amp; Critical Community Science Team Project (<i>description</i>)</li> <li>● In-Class Team Project Work: Community Asset/Hazard Mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● On Being with Krista Tippett (2022) Trabian Shorters: A Cognitive Skill to Magnify Humanity Podcast</li> <li>● Asset Mapping Research</li> <li>● <i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> <li>● <i>Project Teams Assigned</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to establish weekly team meeting time outside of class and show up for in class team project work*</i></p>
<b>19 Feb</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Intro to Critical Community Science</li> <li>● In-Class Team Project Work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➢ Initial Steps of Critical Community Science Tool</li> <li>➢ Project Focus Rationale</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fowler (2023) Designing, Sustaining, and Evaluating Environmental Justice Projects: The Critical Community Science Tool</li> <li>● <i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> </ul>
<b>26 Feb</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Key Principles for Authentic Community Engagement</li> <li>● Case Study Scenarios: Applying Authentic Community Engagement Best Practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● North Am. Association for Enviro. Ed. (2000) Guidelines for Excellence in Community Engagement</li> <li>● Healthy Food Policy Project (Accessed 2021) Food Access Policy Change Through Authentic Resident Engagement</li> <li>● <i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to continue with weekly team meeting time outside of class*</i></p>
<b>5 Mar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Key Principles for Authentic Community Engagement (<i>continued</i>)</li> <li>● In-Class Team Project Work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➢ Small Group Share Out of Rationale of Project Focus</li> <li>➢ Project Ideation (<i>pulling from strategies in course material to address project focus</i>)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Part 1: Rationale for Socio-Environmental Focus (based on asset mapping &amp; critical community science prompts)</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to continue with weekly team meeting time outside of class and show up for in class team project work*</i></p>
<b>12 Mar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culturally Sustaining Environmental Education Approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Project READY: Reimagining Equity &amp; Access for Diverse Youth. (2018) Module 17: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy</li> <li>● Balcos (2019) Decolonizing Environmental Education</li> <li>● <i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> </ul>
<b>19 Mar</b>	<i>Spring Recess</i>	—

<b>26 Mar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culturally Sustaining Environmental Education Approaches (<i>continued</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>No Homework Due!</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to continue with weekly team meeting time outside of class*</i></p>
<b>2 Apr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In-Class Concept Pitch of 2 Project Ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Part 2: Concept Pitch of 2 Project Ideas Due</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: Your team will receive feedback on your team project by Friday; it is important to meet weekly outside of class*</i></p>
<b>9 Apr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trauma Informed Mentorship</li> <li>● Mock Scenarios: Applying Trauma Informed Approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ham (2017) Understanding Trauma: Learning Brain vs Survival Brain</li> <li>● Gonzalez (2023) Unpacking Trauma-Informed Teaching - Cult of Pedagogy Podcast</li> <li>● <i>Discussion Prompts Due</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to continue with weekly team meeting time outside of class*</i></p>
<b>16 Apr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In-Class Presentation of First Draft of Team Project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Part 3: First Version of Culturally Sustaining &amp; Critical Community Science Project Due</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: Your team will receive feedback on your team project by Friday; it is important to meet weekly outside of class*</i></p>
<b>17 Apr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 5 Leadership Lessons for Leading for Change</li> <li>● Meet Current Difference Maker Mentors!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>No Homework Due!</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to continue with weekly team meeting time outside of class*</i></p>
<b>23 Apr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In-Class Team Project Work</li> <li>● Project Idea Refinement (<i>pulling from strategies in course material to address project focus</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>No Homework Due!</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Note: very important to continue with weekly team meeting time outside of class and show up for in class team project work*</i></p>
<b>30 Apr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In-Class Presentation of Final Version of Team Project</li> <li>● Course Wrap-Up</li> <li>● <i>Application for NRCA Difference Maker Mentors Open</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Part 4: Final Version of Culturally Sustaining &amp; Critical Community Science Project Due</i></li> </ul>

**Late Work Policy:** As we will be working collaboratively, late work is especially discouraged since it will impact not only your own success, but the success of others within and outside of our class. All assignments are due at the time indicated on the syllabus and in the assignment instructions. It is your responsibility to complete and submit assignments in accordance with the due date and submission details.

**Late individual assignments received within 24 hours of the due date and time will automatically receive a 15% absolute deduction** (i.e., highest score possible = 85%, equivalent to a drop of one full letter grade). Unless prior permission is received from the instructor because of university-approved extenuating circumstances, assignments will not be accepted more than 24 hours after the assigned deadline. Students have up to 2 weeks after a particular assignment is handed back to ask questions about the grade.

I reserve the right to change due dates as needed to accommodate issues that might arise. Changes will be communicated in class, via email, or announced on HuskyCT.

**Course Communication & Contacting the Instructor:** I will primarily post course announcements via HuskyCT but will use UConn student email accounts for all course communication that occurs via email. **Therefore, it is very important that you check your UConn account regularly.** It is your responsibility to remove appropriate filters so that email messages from this course are not filtered, and to make sure communication via UConn email is working properly.

To accommodate your schedules, my office hours are by appointment. **Please contact me by email to set up office hour meetings. I encourage you to email me about course material beyond office hours.**

Remember to create a good impression via email. Think of me as someone that you would like a letter of recommendation from. As such, prepare your email in a professional way—NOT as you would address your friends in email or text. A formal salutation, complete sentences, capital letters where appropriate, proper grammar, punctuation, etc. are expected. I will not respond to emails that are inappropriate or incomprehensible. I always intend to treat students with courtesy, respect, and empathy, and expect courtesy, respect, and empathy in return.

**Absences:** If you must be absent from class sessions, please email Laura and your team project collaborators. Unless impossible, send notice prior to your absence. Providing adequate notice is professional etiquette and a demonstration of active participation. It is your responsibility to contact the instructor for class materials you may have missed and to discuss a plan for making up your missed class time and work. Please note, however, that being absent from class does not change the submission deadline for an assignment unless prior arrangements have been made. Please stay home if you are feeling ill and go home if you start to feel ill during class. **To receive an excused absence, you must email Laura ([laura.cisneros@uconn.edu](mailto:laura.cisneros@uconn.edu)).** **Excused absences may include** religious holidays, illnesses, family emergencies, or participation in scholarly presentations, performing arts, and intercollegiate sports, when the participation is at the request of, or coordinated by, a university official.

**Classroom Environment:** My goal is to make the classroom environment a safe and welcoming space for all students, without threat. We are a diverse collection of individuals with a variety of backgrounds, values, and opinions. This provides a great opportunity to learn from each other's perspectives and experiences. I encourage students to push themselves out of their individual comfort zone as related to the course material into their learning and growth zone. *Students are expected to demonstrate general respect for all other individuals involved with this course in class, outside of class, and within the HuskyCT environment. There will be no exceptions to this rule. I encourage you to inform me if you feel*

***threatened or uncomfortable about a situation in the classroom or related to the course. I will address it directly, promptly, and appropriately at my discretion.***

**Academic Integrity:** You are responsible for ensuring that original work is correctly attributed. You must give clear and complete attributions for the work of others in your own productions as well as in any written work. Plagiarism (either digital or written) will not be tolerated and may result in failure of the course or expulsion. Please refer to the [Student Code](#).

**Academic Accommodations:** UConn is committed to protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities and assuring that the learning environment is accessible. If you anticipate or experience physical or academic barriers based on disability or pregnancy, please let me know immediately so that we can discuss options. Students who require accommodations should contact the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD), Wilbur Cross Room 204, (860) 486-2020 or <https://csd.uconn.edu/>.

**Health Resources:** Good mental and physical health are integral to personal and professional growth and academic success. If you may benefit from speaking with a mental health professional, you can find support and resources through the Student Health and Wellness-Mental Health (SHaW-MH) office. You can visit the office in Storrs in the Arjona Building, 4th Floor, or contact the office at (860) 486-4705, or visit <https://studenthealth.uconn.edu/> for services or questions. If life circumstances are affecting your ability to focus on courses and your UConn experience, you can email the Dean of Students at [dos@uconn.edu](mailto:dos@uconn.edu) to request support.

**University Policies:** Students in this course are held to the standards and policies of the University of Connecticut. Make sure you are familiar with: <http://provost.uconn.edu/syllabi-references>

- [Absences from Final Examinations](#)
- [Class Attendance](#)
- [Credit Hour](#)
- [People with Disabilities, Policy Statement](#)
- [Discrimination, Harassment and Related Interpersonal Violence, Policy Against](#)
- [The Student Code](#)
- [Academic Misconduct Procedures for Instructors](#)