This course advances the SoHE Big Idea “Ecology of Human Wellbeing,” meaning that course participants will seek to understand and actively improve the quality of human lives and the ecological commons. Using food as a lens, we will explore both the historical roots and current practice of human ecology as a force for social reform. In specific, we will focus on the politics and practice of food provisioning in the U.S. from the late nineteenth century until present day.

Major themes include skill, power, health, justice, and ecological sustainability. Course readings present perspectives from SoHE’s four departments (i.e. design studies, human and family development, consumer science, and community studies). Class sessions include mini-lectures, group discussions, guest presenters, in-class workshops, multisensory “tastings,” and field trips. Finally, through the course assignments, students will: (1) use the lens of material culture to analyze a historical artifact from one of UW-Madison’s collections of primary materials related to food and sustainability, (2) participate in survey research on food justice issues, and (3) conduct an oral history interview before writing a “labor portrait” of the interviewee.

After taking this class, students will be able to:

- Articulate and debunk some of the common misperceptions about the origins and evolution of home economics.

- Explain why a healthy ecological commons is central to the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities.

- Illustrate the relationship between food production, skill, power, and sustainability.

- Draw informed conclusions that reflect an understanding of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) sources of information.

- Use food as a physical material for academic inquiry and the practice of mindfulness.

- Locate and use a variety of UW-Madison’s library resources and special collections.

- Use objects (e.g. photographs, textiles, cookbooks) to tell stories about how humans relate to each other and their environments.

- Conduct oral history interviews and analysis.

- Actively contribute to ongoing scholarly and activist efforts to enhance the social justice and ecological sustainability of the domestic food system.