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Sponsored by:  
The Student Sustainability Initiative  
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# Student Research Conferences Create a Community of Scholars on Climate Change Policy

## Teaching Strategy

Barry Rabe's undergraduate policy seminar focuses on organizing and presenting a student research conference on climate change policy in only one semester. Students spend the semester writing a comprehensive research paper on the topic of their choice. The result is a diverse set of research presentations on policy issues related to climate change and sustainability. Topics range from transportation systems and local governance to global conflict and the spread of infectious disease.

Students discuss and practice oral presentation skills and are deeply involved in planning and staging the end-of-semester conference. To learn about effective presentation skills, including the use of PowerPoint, and the role of the discussant and chair on conference panels, students analyze video footage of the First National Conference on Climate Change from University of Virginia's Miller Center for Policy Affairs.

During the conference, students are divided into panels to encourage discussion across presentations. Students from the class also serve as discussants and chairs for each panel. Students from the audience engage by asking questions after each presentation.

Sustainability cuts across many dimensions of public policy and is something that every policy student will need to confront in their professional careers. Engaging in research-based discussions of sustainability helps students understand how complex policy issues truly are and develop the skills needed to critically analyze such issues.

## Faculty Perspectives

*"When we say sustainability, we're talking about something that really does cut across disciplines and across policy venues in every possible way. In their research, some students drew much more from the natural and physical sciences, others from the social sciences. There are multiple lenses that need to be applied."*

*"Not all students have a common background, and they don't necessarily agree on all of the issues. I think that's refreshing. One challenge in a lot of sustainability teaching is that when you gather students who have an interest in the environment, a certain set of conversations takes place. When you expand that, it's a much broader range of perspectives and experiences that come into play. This is much more of a melting pot."*

## Student Perspectives

*"Before I was more focused on the science of climate change, and I was merely frustrated by the politics of climate change. Now my interest has reversed; my interest is more in the politics of climate change, and not so much being frustrated by why there isn't as much action as we'd like, but recognizing that it's important to know why we haven't achieved any policy action."*

*"This course presents an opportunity for students to make the course more salient for them. Professor Rabe gave us so much ownership over which topic to discuss that everyone ended up researching a topic that had to do with sustainability through the lens of their own interests."*

*"I like the fact that you are able to produce a significant research paper. It can become a lot more than just a paper. It can become a defining aspect of your academic career. There is a lot of interest in expanding these papers."*

## Examples of Teaching and/or Student Artifacts



Students Participate in the Climate Policy Research Conference