

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Welcome to the *Career and Academic Research Center Podcast*. I am your host, Chris Davis, and today I am really happy to have with me Mark-- Leighton or Leighton?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Leighton.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Leighton, OK. I always I think I'm going to get that wrong, and I usually get it right. Mark is the Associate Director of the Sustainability Program here at Harvard Extension School. He's also a senior research advisor. So we're going to be talking about specifically one of the courses that he teaches, the next instance of which is going to be in spring 2019. It's really a fascinating course. And we haven't yet spotlighted an individual course like this, but this one is really so special I wanted to sit down and talk with Mark about it to give you all an opportunity to learn more about this course.

So it's Sustainable Food Enterprises In Rural Areas, Evaluating American Versus European Practices In Tuscany, and it's E143. And I'm going to have Mark kind of just talk a little bit about his background and what he does at DCE, and then we're going to talk about this amazing course.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Thanks, Chris. So as Chris mentioned, much of my work at DCE involves overseeing the thesis program in sustainability. So I teach the thesis proposal course called Crafting the Thesis Proposal, and I've managed to help the roughly 30 students a year finish their thesis up in the program. And I also teach the main kind of quantitative gateway course into our sustainability master's degree program.

Between those two things, it keeps me pretty busy. But I really love teaching these kinds of hybrid courses that include fieldwork overseas. I teach another one in the summer that's based in St. John in the US Virgin Islands that is on natural resource management, that also includes a week there. And this course spends a week, now, in Tuscany at this wonderful property called Spannocchia, a historical farmstead devoted towards teaching sustainability, especially in food programs, although they host lots of other educational courses especially for American colleges and universities.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Oh, that's fascinating. So it's a live web conference.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And I see it starts off talking about-- its really interesting, metropolitan-- the focus is rural areas and specifically, economic opportunities and responsible kind of right of industries. So building up to the Tuscany trip, how does the course begin? What is the focus?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Well we have lots of background on this specific topic. And so I was led to this because it's become clear not only in the United States, but around the world, that with sort of emphasis on high technology that metropolitan areas do really well in this, like the thriving area around Boston. But if we go 20 miles west to here and throughout rural America, we see a difficulty in economic development occurring there. And so this was a specific focus on rural environments, rural landscapes, and it has emerged that one of the most exciting ways in which these regions can prosper economically, and people living in these rural areas that come from farming or forestry type backgrounds can prosper, is by participating in the kind of sustainable food enterprise movement that especially emphasizes small-scale organic farming, permaculture, and direct marketing to retailers that might include directly farm-to-table type operations. So this course is generally devoted towards sustainability practices in rural environments. It especially focuses on food enterprises.

So one of the things we do, then, in the course-- or I would say the primary emphasis in the course is on sustainable food systems. And the main skill the course really develops in students is kind of doing cash flow and cost benefit analysis in which you're modeling the relative profitability and the sustainability benefits of these kinds of enterprises. So someone has an idea to improve the financial success of growing something, of raising some farm animal, participating in a marketing scheme to further develop organic farming enterprises or farm-to-table restaurant operations. The normal scale to do that with is a hardcore spreadsheet analysis where you model this.

So over the course, the course includes, then, several exercises building up people's skills in this. And then during the week in Tuscany, the students form different groups to look at enterprise opportunities to model while at this property at Spannocchia in Italy. So this is very exciting for students because we can identify at the Spannocchia 1,000-acre property about 20 different kinds of enterprises they're involved in, things like wastewater management or their power system. Most of the power they develop is from sustainably harvesting their own firewood and very efficiently burning this to provide heating to many, many buildings.

And so as a historical farm, Spannocchia is trying to demonstrate, in many ways, traditional methods of growing things and modeling things, but wanting to do this with a hardcore look at the bottom line of making sure these are efficient and profitable. So the students end up in the course adopting a role of being consultants, if you will, trying to analyze what's going on there now and then suggesting improvements to the systems they have now.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So I see it's also in the course name itself in the description, so a comparison is also a big part of this course right because you're comparing between New England and Tuscany. So before the Tuscany experience, do you go in to methods of rural agribusiness or food business in the New England area, and then kind of compare that with the European version? And then once the students arrive in Tuscany, then they're really kind of using what they've learned, that comparison, extrapolating what they've learned to apply it to that week that they're there?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yeah, very much exactly like that, Chris. So Tuscany, as you might know, is the perfect example of a sustainable landscape. So that combination of natural environments, forests, and the agricultural landscape, the maintenance of historical structures, and the hill towns that mark Tuscany is very much held as an example for how to do this right. But they struggle themselves with making sure the rural landscape in particular can be sustainable, especially in its agricultural practices.

So that's Tuscany. New England, it's turned out in the last few decades or so to be becoming a hotbed of agricultural innovation in organic farming and small-scale farming, these kinds of farming systems-- small-scale, diverse agricultural products-- having a history in places like Tuscany that extend over 1,000 years. In fact, this Spannocchia itself has been an operating estate farm for over 900 years. And there's historical records that go back that long mapping the land use of that farmstead, which emphasize very diverse products and management techniques, both for agriculture and forestry there.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So let's talk a little bit about Spannocchia because-- and before we go further, I do want to mention that I think it's a little hard to do justice in words only what the experience is like. So what I'm hoping to do as part of this is link with this recording to this Spannocchia website, and also there is an amazing video that was created by one of the students in this course, I think in 2017, Jess Ahearn?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes, yes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** As you mentioned, this estate has a long history, and I saw that in the last century it's passed

down in this but in this one specific family, the current owners. And the owners now, from what I read, they through the '90s spent many years renovating Spannocchia. And it's the Cinelli family, is that correct?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** OK. And it looks like they-- I mean, they do some amazing stuff. And they also partner with not only us, but other schools. I love their motto. We seek to learn from the past to inspire a more sustainable future.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes, perfect. That's why they were very excited when I approached them about doing a sustainability course there because up to that time, they hadn't actually had a course devoted to what they most like to emphasize in sustainability. So they posted lots of painting, ceramic courses, landscape-type courses, but a hardcore sustainability and food systems and the other kind of production systems they have is what they really want to emphasize.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Well, I'd love to ask you to talk a little bit about what the time that students spend there in the week, what happens kind of on a daily basis. One of the things that struck me from watching the video, not having been a part of this, is it really feels like it's a community.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And that experience-- and you're featured in the video, too, but what the students, the staff of Spannocchia and the experience there over the week, it really feels like something that is not only a learning experience, but really a community experience. That's what struck me when I viewed that.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Right, right. So the course is enriched by having this professional staff at Spannocchia that do guest lectures for us and are involved in some of the fieldwork activities. So we have many of these guest lectures from the staff there, which number about six, seven, eight people. I might have gotten that wrong. The full staff might be a dozen, but the people involved in kind of the educational program might be about eight.

We have in the past had outside guest lectures, people from the University of Florence, people involved in policy at the EU level to talk about food policy, food system policy, sustainability issues, which are really fascinating. These often are. Spannocchia always has a cadre of eight interns there working on the sustainability systems, mostly in the food systems. It's a rich kind

of community.

So getting to the daily schedule, there's--

**CHRIS DAVIS:** There's fieldwork, you mentioned.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yeah.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** That's part of it.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** And I'll have breakfast more or less the same time. Then we would have one of these combination fieldwork and lectures during the day. The day ends in the evening. It's a beautiful time of year there in late April or early May, whenever we start the course there.

There is a day we take a field trip. This is often a wonderful highlight. We go by Van or bus, depending on the size of the course, to a biodynamic winery where we're given a fantastic field lecture by the owners of that biodynamic winery, everything about the ecology of the vineyard itself to the production of the grapes, making a tour from the vineyard down into the wine production area. This is a very small-scale winery that markets their wine internationally, directly to specific restaurants around the world.

And then we go on from that in the afternoon to spend the rest of the day at San Gimignano, for any of you who've traveled Tuscany, that would have been-- you'd know that as a highlight, a hill town, famous historical hill town visits. That's a special extra day.

Generally, we try to add onto that. This year, this next spring, we would do it by encouraging people to arrive in the morning or a day early, and we're going to rendezvous in the town of Siena and spend the day there before we start our week-long time in Spannocchia. So it's a wonderful time to experience.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Both on the Spannocchia website and also Jess's video too, there's some amazing drone footage of the surrounding countryside and the land of Spannocchia itself. It really looks gorgeous.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes, it is. It's spectacular. So I encourage everyone to look at the video. There's an interesting story behind it because Jess is a film student. It was her undergraduate degree and professional experience, so she's very expert in doing this. But it only came out that she was making this video the very last night of the class. And of course, I'm up with our guest lecturer

engaged with talking about them. The course students are kind of strung out behind me, so I had no idea who is flying drones around the property.

And so the very last night of the course, when we were having kind of a going away party, Jess said to me, oh, Mark, by the way, do you think the students would be interested in looking at this video I produced? And I was kind of like, what? And then we all left and saw this video--

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And you didn't know.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** No. I didn't know she was making this video she had put together of the course. So a warning-- the video is spectacular in showing the landscape, students having an enjoyable time. I would say what it's missing a little bit is the work the students do.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** There's a little bit of it.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** I'd emphasize that, yeah.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** I'll include the link to the course with this recording, too. One other thing I noticed, it's listed as an on-campus weekend course. Is there a on-campus weekend in Cambridge, or is that just the Tuscany experience?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** That's the Tuscany experience.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** OK. I just wanted to make sure.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** We're limited here by the categories that they used to have to describe courses. So they have a hard time with a hybrid course that includes a time on campus, so they have to categorize it that way. Students are from anywhere in the world. We're having these meetings by Zoom. Most weeks we do meet one time, and then it's only we get together in Italy and rendezvous actually in Siena.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And as students will see in the course description itself, I just want to point out that the travel and room and board costs are in addition to the course tuition, just to make that clear.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yes.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** But the course description itself I think does a really wonderful job at encapsulating all of this.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Yeah, I think you can read it and get a feel of the course.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Well, thank you, Mark. I appreciate you taking the time. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

**MARK LEIGHTON:** No, Chris. I think that covers it. And I thank those of you listening in for the patience of listening to us. And maybe I'll hope to see some of you in the Tuscany course, as everyone refers to it.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** I hope so, too. And the audio visual really sells this, but again, emphasizing that there's also-- it's a semester-long course. This is a part of it, but it sounds like an amazing experience and I really am envious of anyone who is able to be a part of it. So Mark, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

**MARK LEIGHTON:** Thank you, Chris.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And thank you, everyone, for listening to the *Career and Academic Resource Center's Podcast*. Thank you so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]