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Teaching Urban Forestry Online

Jim Hubbell [1] and Fred Baker[2]

Because of changing faculty commitments, urban forestry had not been taught in almost 10 years, despite an increasing need, especially by professionals already working away from campus. Moving the course online was perceived as an effective way to meet this need while minimizing faculty and/or student travel.

The course is designed to work within the WebCT environment, and discusses 20 major topics (modules) during the 15-week semester. Each module consists of a subject matter presentation including both text and figures written in HTML. Students must submit at least one activity each week, which requires the students to use newly gained information or to search the Internet and other resources for additional information. These activities provide a common foundation for learning, but the real learning in the course occurs in weekly discussions, to take advantage of the diversity of expertise within the group. Faculty and guest speakers pose questions to start the discussion; the instructor and teaching assistant facilitate those discussions. The course was first offered in the spring semester, 2002 and each semester since.

Although technical issues can hamper student progress, adult learners frequently go far beyond the minimum requirements as they become engaged in the material. Learning through the discussion format works best when the students are all on the same topic during the same timeframe.

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