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ESF Online Goes Live Spring 2009!

www.esf.edu/esfonline

The SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) proudly announces that *ESF Online* "opened for business" this semester. *ESF Online* is a web-based approach to teaching and learning that will enable people working full time or seeking careers, as well as part-time and full-time students from high schools and colleges throughout the U.S. and beyond to register for ESF courses as a part-time or non-matriculated student.

With support from the Betsy and Jesse Fink Foundation, our inaugural course offerings include *The Global Environment and the Evolution of Human Culture* (EFB 120). Global Environment, which fulfills a SUNY General Education requirement for Natural Science or Social Science, is offered to nearly three hundred on-campus students each academic year. It is also offered currently to over three hundred qualified high school students throughout Central New York and New York City through the *ESF in the High School* program. The creation of *ESF Online* now makes it possible for other "off-campus" students to take this timely and relevant course.

A second course, *Seminar on University Outreach and Engagement* (EFB 796), is a graduate-level special topics course in which students complete all *Global Environment* course activities as well as a critical analysis of online learning and teaching.

Fourteen non-matriculated students and two ESF grad students are currently participating in *Global Environment* through ESF Online. All of their course work is done completely online. Students are joining us from as far away as New York City and Michigan. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds including upper level high school, traditional and non-traditional undergraduate and graduate.

Course participants include a former computer programmer (and currently stay-at-home Dad) who is interested and engaged in environmental issues in his community. Several participants are environmental science teachers, some of whom have already earned ESF adjunct instructor roles as part of the [ESF in the High School](http://www.esf.edu/esfonline) program, as well as other high school science teachers, some of whom are working toward this goal. Another is a high school senior who is in the high school orchestra, on the girls varsity basketball team, a member of the National Honor Society, and president of the Environmental Club. One student works in environmental research at the University of Michigan. Another moved to the US from the Middle East with her spouse and two kids (and a third on the way) – she's taking this as part of an associates degree program. At least one student is an ESF alum!

How do you learn in an online course?

Students are engaged in a variety of online learning activities including video lectures, discussion forums, asynchronous group work, and more traditional written assignments. The course is divided into 7 Learning Units of closely related topics, plus an additional 8th Unit that consists of a concluding discussion.

Each Learning Unit is composed of several Modules. Modules correspond roughly to the content of one classroom day in the on campus version of the course. For each Module students engage in three core **Learning Activities**:

- **Read.** Most Modules have readings from the required textbooks, the Internet, or embedded documents, that are completed before moving on to the rest of the module. Readings provide background information for the module and allow students to engage in informed discussions. Students need to utilize the readings to support their discussion posts in order to receive full points.
- **View.** Each Module also has a series of video lectures to watch. These cover the material similar to the way it would be presented in the lectures of the face-to-face version of the class. The videos review some information that was covered in the reading as well as explore new related information, and help students key in on what the important points are from the reading.
- **Engage.** Active student participation is achieved through course discussions. Discussions entail **posting** comments and responses to a group discussion board, and **writing** a one-page *My Continent* paper and posting it to the discussion board. Students are assigned to small working groups of about 6 students. Each module has a corresponding group discussion forum that opens on the first day of the module and closes several days later. Most discussions are done in these groups rather than as the entire class so that each student is fully engaged in the learning process. Discussions (that is, posting comments, responses and one-page papers) are one of the primary means of evaluating student progress and providing feedback throughout the semester. This active participation in the Discussion Boards, in effect, replaces many of the traditional attendance, homework, and quizzes that characterize a traditional classroom course. Discussion posts are graded for quality and content following a published "grading rubric." Early module discussions are more guided but in later discussions students post a solid critical-thinking question based on module content. Questions should tie in content from the current module with that of previous modules and require a synthesis of information to answer. "What is ..." or "Define ..." are not acceptable types of questions. Classmates must then respond to these posted questions.

Two major assignments are key to the online Global Environment course:

The Global Environment of My Continent. In the first module of Unit 2 (The Global Heat Engine) students create their own continent to use for the rest of the semester. Students apply information about the global environment from each module to their continent, starting with basic environmental processes, working through the development of complex societies, and concluding with the development of environmental problems and their potential solutions. Students are evaluated on their understanding of the module content by their ability to apply it to their created continent.

For example, if the Module covers Erosion, students explore where on their continent erosion might be most likely to occur and when during its history. Students also explore the possible consequences of erosion on the development of environments and societies of their continent, as well as what inhabitants might do about it, if anything. All conclusions must have a foundation in course content. Each *My Continent* paper consists of a representation on a map of their continent and a one-page long description explaining the reasoning.

Research Paper. Students complete a research paper with portions due in several intermediate stages. The research project entails either generating and testing a hypothesis – or doing a creative new analysis using pre-existing data, and then effectively communicating the results and their implications. Any environmental topic is fair game, but the scope should be realistic in order for students to complete and result in a 7-8 page final report (with 1.5 spacing). The research project is an opportunity for students to understand the general process used to obtain new knowledge through the scientific method and to communicate their findings effectively.

To learn more about ESF Online and other ESF outreach programs and projects, please call, email or visit us on the web at www.esf.edu/outreach