

Distance Learning No Longer Far Away

"Animal Science 321 is a working example of how the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is setting a precedent for distance learning," says Dean Sutphin, associate dean and director of Academic Programs.

Last fall, animal science professors John Pollak and Tony Oltenacu offered their one-credit introductory course Applied Animal Genetics for the first time to SUNY Cobleskill and Pennsylvania State University students using "real-time" (live) videoconferencing equipment. Although Pollak and Oltenacu had taught the course before, this was the first semester they offered it as distance learning. The Cobleskill and Penn State students agreed that the distance learning feature was not a barrier to the value of the course, report Pollak and Oltenacu. "Looking back 13 weeks, I think it was a great success and worth the effort," says Oltenacu.



John Pollak teaches Cornell students in the classroom, while SUNY Cobleskill and Penn State students learn at a distance.

Thirteen speakers, including Bob Lacy of the Chicago Zoological Park, Rob Fleischer of the Washington D.C. National Zoo, William Provine of Biological Sciences at Cornell, and Cornell grad Anita DeStefano of the Boston University School of Medicine, made presentations to the course's 32 Cornell students, 6 Cobleskill students, and 5 Penn State students.

To receive Cornell University's transmission of the course, SUNY Cobleskill and Penn State classrooms were equipped with PictureTel software. Sue Irvine, CALS technology support coordinator, explains that at Cornell a camera equipped for videoconferencing receives the live presentation and transmits the information to a high-bandwidth telephone line, which allows transmission of real-time video and audio information. SUNY Cobleskill and Penn State computers receive the transmission and display the presentation via PictureTel.

Grading for the one-credit course was based on bimonthly abstracts (students summarize every other presentation), attendance, and participation. Because it was a trial run for distance education, only Cornell students were required to write abstracts of the presentations.

"Tony and I responded to those abstracts by pointing out information that was overlooked or misunderstood," explains Pollak. Cobleskill students were required to submit a set of questions each week to be answered during the Friday online discussion sections.

This spring Pollak and Oltenacu will offer a one-credit laboratory section online using the computer software VisualBasic. They also plan to videotape course presentations as a back-up measure to allow for variations in university vacation and class schedules.

CALS Distance Learning Initiatives

Pollak and Oltenacu decided to offer their course partly in response to an initiative of the college and the CALS Distance Learning Committee to develop distance learning projects. Sutphin hopes that "faculty will begin to develop distance learning programs and collaborate with other colleges and universities to gain efficiency and enhance quality." In addition, distance learning activities can address increasing needs for lifelong learning. Sutphin encourages faculty to develop distance learning prototypes for special audiences and niche markets such as Cornell alumni, other professionals, summer and winter courses, autotutorial courses, and cross-university course offerings.

"Information technology has removed the previous limitations of time and space in a profound way so that the opportunity to learn at 'any time and any place' is now a reality," states the Distance Learning Report developed in July 1997. The report outlines the potential of distance learning to

- create educational links to business and industry;
- create an online professional degree program;
- improve access to instructional material;
- improve course organization;
- increase academic research possibilities; and
- increase summer and winter course offerings.

"One hundred sixty professors university-wide are in the process of developing a distance learning program or already have developed one," says Jonathon Levy, associate director of the Cornell Office of

Distance Learning. He encourages faculty interested in developing distance learning programs to visit Cornell's distance learning Web site at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/distlearn/> or contact him in 187 Ives Hall at 255-2055 or jl63@cornell.edu.

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