

OSU looks to Ecampus to train future agronomists

By **BRETT TALLMAN**
For the Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Tom Chastain, a professor of seed crop physiology and ecology at Oregon State University, has taught seed production every spring since 1992.

But in the fall term, Chastain taught the course, Crop 450, online for the first time.

“It was a new venture for me,” Chastain said. “I like this kind of thing, but I needed help on lecturing to a camera as opposed to a room full of people. And figuring out how I was

going to maintain contact with students, answering questions and facilitating discussions online.”

OSU’s Crop and Soil Science Department doesn’t have an online degree program yet, but Chastain estimates that’s only about 18 months off. Af-

ter a “very favorable” external review in November, Chastain said they are looking to add courses in plant genetics, soil fertility, and several others to the two classes the department offers online now.

“The bulk of the growth at OSU in the last few years has been in online courses,” Chastain said. “My feeling is, once we have some more classes online, we’ll have a big bump in department enrollment.”

The decision to offer a crop and soil science degree online is OSU’s answer to a steady decline in enrollment in traditional crop and soil science classes at OSU, as well as in similar programs around the country.

“The agronomy program is not big,” Chastain said. “We’ve had some enrollment issues, but there are good job opportunities throughout the country. People are just not taking advantage of those opportunities.”

Sixty students are now enrolled in degree programs in Chastain’s department. Chastain said Crop 450, which has drawn an average of 20 students over the last five years in traditional classrooms, had 13 Ecampus students for the



Tom Chastain

same class online. Of the 13, five were from Oregon. The rest were from Iowa, Florida, Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Utah, South Dakota and even Tasmania.

“A lot of them are place-bound people,” Chastain said. “They have jobs or families. For whatever reason they can’t take time off to come to Corvallis. My student from Tasmania is already working as an agronomist and now wants a formal education.”

By broadening its reach as a department, Chastain said OSU can reach those place-bound students and begin training more people to work in the field.

Chastain is quick to say he’s not the first professor in his department to take advantage of online classes. Sabry Elias, an associate professor of seed science and technology, saw the same problems in 2010.

“Enrollment for my class wasn’t so big,” he said. “I talked with the head of my department and was able to transfer my curriculum online.”

Seed science and technology is the only class Elias teaches online and, while Elias admitted online classes can’t replace the interactions in a traditional classroom, he is passionate about what he is teaching.

“There is a challenge we’re trying to solve,” he said. “The number of working seed scientists is decreasing to an alarming degree.”

Like Chastain’s online students, the students signing up for Elias’ class are spread across the country and around the world.

“About half of my students now are working professionals,” he said. “They are coming from Kentucky, New York, Hawaii and even Thailand. By offering courses online, we’re able to get more students interested.”

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