



Water is focus of 10 new web-based classes for UI distance education students

Bob Weber, a licensed mechanical engineer at HP in Boise, expects this summer to become the UI's first distance education student to receive a master's degree in environmental science with an emphasis in water. "There's no way I would have been able to break free for a year and a half" to attend the UI in Moscow, said the full-time employee, husband, and father of a two-year-old daughter. "This made it possible to get my master's."

Meanwhile, Weber's wife, Konya, a professor at Northwest Nazarene University, is pursuing a Ph.D. from Touro University International in New York, also as a distance education student.

Recognizing that the Webers represent a growing population of "placebound" professionals eager to continue their educations, a group of 10 UI faculty has secured funding from the State Board of Education to develop 10 water-based classes for distance delivery over the World Wide Web.

Water makes sense as a UI distance education emphasis in part because the UI's water faculty is so strong and because water runs through several college's curricula, said Bob Mahler, professor of soil science, who is heading up the Environmental Science Program's distance education efforts. "We want to deliver high-impact courses and be sustainable," said Mahler.

The 10 particular courses chosen for distance delivery exemplify some of the



Photo by Katherine Jones

A mechanical engineer at HP in Boise during the day, Bob Weber at night pursues his UI master's degree in environmental science as a distance education student.

best expertise and teaching the UI has to offer, he said. "I think institutions are finding out they can offer distance programs only in areas where they're very competitive," said Mahler. And when it comes to water, "We believe Idaho can provide the best courses in the West."

"There's a huge demand for environmental science out there in the world," said Chris Dixon, management assistant for the Environmental Science Program. From 10 students in 1993, enrollment in the environmental science master's program has grown to 78 students today, more than a third of them off-campus, including 15 who, like Weber, are specializing in water as distance education students.

The 10 courses will support the Environmental Science Program's statewide master's degree programs, its 12-credit professional water certificate

program, and the graduate programs of other colleges serving students at a distance. Even on-campus students could benefit from web enhancements their professors bring to live classes.

The faculty chose web-delivery in part because it offers so much flexibility for students. In Boise, Weber gets to wear his dad's hat while his daughter, Camise, is up. "After she goes to bed I can go do my class," he said.

Among the 10 classes funded through the SBOE grant is hydrology, taught by Jan Boll, associate professor of agricultural and biological engineering. When he taught the class live last year, 11 students signed up. This year, in its web format, the class has 17 students, from as far away as Colorado. Discussions among students over the web have been lively, he said, continuing long after he would have had to cut them off in a live class.

For Weber's final master's project, he plans to conduct a city-mandated assessment of HP's stormwater system, saving his employer the cost of hiring an outside firm to do the job. HP picked up the tab for his master's education, said Weber, and the savings "will just about pay off the education expenses."

