

# Weekend Learning Experience for Turfgrass Students

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## Abstract

With the number of distance education courses increasing in the university setting, it is crucial that students enrolled in these classes not receive any less of an education. In an introductory turfgrass class at the University of Florida, we have designed an interactive two-day learning experience where students enrolled in a hybrid distance education course in locations around the state are brought together to further engage the students with their peers and instructors. Through a series of problem solving, planning and budgeting exercises we have seen benefits from increased interaction between students and instructors. This two-day program also includes time when students get to visit intensively managed golf and sports turf facilities and ask questions of the staff. By taking part in this hands-on learning experience, the students further develop skills that are essential to future employment.

## Introduction

Distance education courses are becoming more prevalent throughout the university system to increase enrollment and reach out to students in remote locations (Herrington, 2006; Powell et al., 2008) without requiring additional staffing (Latour, 2003). Distance education presents many advantages because of the flexibility and outreach it provides. Students benefit by being able to experience courses that are not normally available at their location. Instructors can also seamlessly integrate web videos, current articles, or guest speakers, providing the students with more current information that may not yet be in text books. Instructors also benefit by being able to provide a similar course with a lesser workload (Turgeon and Thompson, 2004; McKenney et al., 2010).

However, distance education courses may present several problems because of the delivery method(s) and the amount and type of interaction provided. Moore (1989) suggests that instructor-learner, learner-content and learner-learner interaction are all necessary for a successful course. In a distance education environment, it is more difficult to keep the same level of instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction that is provided in a resident setting because the students are not physically present. Students are not as easily able to interact with their classmates or instructors as they are in a face-to-face fashion. This has the potential to lead to a more impersonal environment that has the potential to adversely affect their educational experience. These problems were deemed unacceptable for the students taught by these authors and it was found necessary to address these shortcomings with a supplemental learning experience.

At the University of Florida (UF), Golf and Sports Turf Management (ORH4223) is a junior- and senior-level hybrid course that is team taught by Drs. Jason Kruse and J. Bryan Unruh. Dr. Kruse teaches content related to Sports Turf Management to students on the main UF campus in Gainesville, while Dr. Unruh teaches golf course management content to students at the UF Milton Campus (located in northwest Florida near Pensacola). The content taught at each location is then video teleconferenced using Polycom (Polycom Inc., 4750 Willow Road, Pleasanton, CA 94588-2708) to students at the other campus, as well as to additional UF locations across the state. The student demographic includes traditional undergraduate students majoring in turfgrass management, horticulture or agronomic

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majors and industry professionals seeking professional development opportunities. The course is also dual-listed for graduate credit. This delivery format provides somewhat more interaction because there are two locations with faculty members instead of the usual one; however, there are still students at other UF locations that receive less instructor-learner/learner-learner interaction. One way in which we have found to minimize this problem is by providing an interactive weekend where students from all distance education locations meet at a central site to put the knowledge obtained during the course to practical use.

In 2008, a “Weekend Learning Experience” was organized to allow students to take part in experiential learning exercises that allowed them to apply the knowledge gained during the lecture component of the golf and sports turf management course to practical, real-life situations. The program was designed to provide an enhanced experience for distance education students by incorporating active learning strategies (Williams, 2006).

The Weekend Learning Experience has two objectives: I) to provide students with a hands-on learning experience that will help them develop essential employment skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork; and II) to allow students an up-close look at professional turfgrass facilities where they are able to observe and ask questions of professional turf managers.

### Format/Structure

The format of this mandatory attendance learning experience includes several key activities spread over a two-day period. The first day (Friday), all students and instructors travel to a hotel in central Florida near Orlando (maximum travel distance is about 450 miles). Students from throughout the state meet and are able to see their classmates face to face – most for the first time. This program brings together students with varied backgrounds and experience levels and urges them to work together to solve turfgrass management issues. The hotel conference room serves as a classroom and provides a professional environment that is conducive to learning.

Students are tasked with several projects during the first evening. First, students are divided into small groups of three or four students and assigned management scenarios that encourage communication and teamwork. Group selection is done by the instructors and is based on several factors: I) the students’ affinity towards golf course management or sports turf management; II) background experience (i.e., traditional students paired with professionals); and III) intentional placement of

extroverted and introverted students together. Each group is given an outline of an unnamed golf or sports facility describing management area, equipment, staff, budget, usage and customer expectations. An additional component within each management scenario is related to employee relations (i.e., multi-cultural/ethnic/lingual work place). The learning groups are asked to create a one-year management plan for their assigned facility. An important goal of this experience is to get students to think creatively and work as a team. Students work to solve both typical and atypical problems that they may face on the particular job site outlined in their management scenario. All of the given information is derived from real-world Extension consultation with facilities within the state of Florida. Students work together to design a creative management plan within the specifications of their given facility.

The second exercise focuses on developing creativity, logic and problem-solving skills. Each group of students is given a one-page summary of a golf course or athletic facility case study. This summary outlines certain details about the course or facility and describes a specific problem or oddity that occurred. As with the management scenarios, all problems are real world and were derived from specific Extension consultations done by instructors’ work within the state. Students are required to design an action plan to solve the problem. This requires them to use knowledge learned in the lecture portion of this class and their academic careers, as well as their past experience in the turfgrass industry. Instructors serve as experts and can be called upon to answer certain questions or to provide additional information. As experts on the case, instructors have soil, tissue and water test results as well as a history of fertilizer, pesticide and irrigation inputs. This information is made available to the students only when it is asked for. This is intended to teach students to use their resources and ask questions that they may not know themselves.

The final exercise of the first evening of this learning experience mainly focuses on developing communication skills. Each group of students presents both their management and action plans to the rest of the class via an informal dialogue. The other students act as the greens committee, asking questions and requiring justification for the plan and money that will be spent. The group proposes strategies to address their specific issues and validate why this will be an effective plan of action. During this time students must justify cultural practices that are implemented and discuss why they chose to do or not to do something.

Logistically, the evening typically begins at 6:00 PM and often goes until midnight. The instructors cover the

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hotel expense (based on quad occupancy) for all students and a hotel that includes breakfast is selected.

The second day (Saturday) of the Weekend Learning Experience focuses on visiting two turfgrass facilities and talking with their management staff. The first visit is made to ESPN's Wide World of Sports (<http://espnwos.disney.go.com/>), a world class athletic field complex located at Walt Disney World that has soccer, football, baseball, softball and lacrosse fields. Students are able to see each of these fields and the equipment it takes to manage them. The turf management staff of the complex gives a tour and answers any questions the students have. The interactions between the students and the turf managers have led to several excellent discussions on management philosophies, facility organization, tool and equipment requirements, water usage, fertilization, staff management, unionized labor, managing clay, equipment preference and leasing vs. buying machinery. The instructors cover most of these topics during the lecture portion of the class, but being able to hear them first-hand from someone who deals with these issues on a daily basis really helps the students understand their importance.

The second visit is to Grand Cypress Golf Club (<http://www.grandcypress.com/golf/>) to meet with the superintendent and to tour two architecturally unique golf courses and the maintenance facility. This gives students the opportunity to see an operating golf course facility and everything that goes into maintaining it. Students seem interested to find out the amount of equipment, expense and time that it takes to run a quality golf course facility. Meeting with the superintendent gives the students another opportunity to learn from someone in the industry first-hand. At this location there have been great discussions about turf care, cultural practices, management style, facility organization, combating noise ordinances, player needs, landscape management, environmental impact and sustainability of the turfgrass system. This visit gives the students another perspective on turfgrass management, engaging them in discussion and challenging them to think about all the attributes of golf course management.

## Discussion

One of the major benefits from this Weekend Learning Experience is the student-student and student-instructor interaction that does not occur as much during the lectures given the format of delivery. Students from across Florida are convened to work together, sharing their diverse backgrounds and experiences to solve common golf and sports turf management problems. Unlike the classroom setting, this learning experience

gives students some face-to-face time with classmates and the opportunity to learn from one another.

This learning experience was designed to develop essential employment skills that students will need when entering the work force and to give students an opportunity to meet and discuss turf issues with managers in the industry. Students benefit by developing planning and budgeting skills while developing their management plans. They experience what it is like to have only a certain amount of money and then decide what management practices are the most important. Many students are surprised to find out that some budgets do not even allow enough for completion of all basic agronomic practices.

The case study portion of this learning experience challenges students to think critically and solve specific problems. This serves as a culmination to what they have learned throughout the course and challenges them to pull all of the ideas together and come up with a solution to the problem. The presentation portion boosts students' communication skills by creating an opportunity for students to simulate a greens committee meeting and justify their management plan. The athletic field and golf course site visits are a great opportunity for students to observe functional facilities and see what goes into making them operate. Students also get to see the differences between managing an athletic field complex and a golf course facility – from the equipment required to staffing demands. Students are surprised to learn that during spring baseball season, multiple field crews often work 24 hours a day and individuals can work 40 hours overtime per week. On the golf course, however, employee overtime was strictly disallowed due to budget constraints.

Although the focus of the Weekend Learning Experience is to benefit the students, the instructors also benefit from the experience. One of the biggest weaknesses of distance education is that the instructor lacks a feel for the student's grasp of the information (Latour, 2003). Our Weekend Learning Experience looks to eliminate that feeling by allowing the instructors to get to meet all students face to face and challenge them to use the information taught during the course. Much of the instructor-student contact over the fifteen-week course is through the video telecommunication or email, a design that is not as conducive to the work environment as face-to-face learning. The learning experience occurs roughly halfway through the semester allowing students time to become familiar with the course material. The timing also allows students and instructors to become more familiar with each other, which leads to more involvement in discussions as the semester progresses. By getting students and instructors together over this two-

day period, it allows instructors to build relationships with the students in the course. Instructors can also continue to work on communication skills as they act as experts during the case study portion of the program. Instructors may also figure out a new way to solve a problem that had not been examined previously.

Several students wrote comments on their course evaluations regarding the learning experience. Out of the numerous positive comments one student wrote, "The weekend learning experience was much more interesting, informative and useful than I thought it would be. Thank you." A second student stated, "The field trip to Orlando was informative, interesting and helpful to see how things are managed in the industry." A third student wrote, "The 'Weekend Learning Trip' was awesome and I learned a lot. It must stay part of the program."

### Summary/Conclusion

To make this learning experience stronger, we are always looking to incorporate ideas to make it more educational, enjoyable and successful. Having students fill out a survey after the conclusion of the program may be a beneficial addition in the future. Getting detailed feedback from the students will allow us to determine what works well and where there is room for improvement.

This two-day interactive Weekend Learning Experience has proven to work well bringing students together and increasing the amount of interaction in this distance education course. This program provides the students and instructors with an experience that cannot otherwise be facilitated through video teleconferencing. It was designed to increase the students' employability by helping them develop several key skill sets that are crucial to turfgrass managers. The visit to ESPN's Wide World of Sports offers a unique experience to see almost every type of athletic field common to the United States, while the visit to Grand Cypress Golf Club allows stu-

dents to see two golf courses and a maintenance facility in action and to discuss issues with the management team. The program as a whole has been shown to stimulate learning in an enjoyable environment. Since its inception, the Weekend Learning Experience has progressed into a valuable experience that is both highly beneficial and enjoyable for the students.

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