

*ICRISAT and University of Florida launch partnership for flexible online courses*

The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the University of Florida (UF) at Gainesville, Florida, USA, launched a partnership with a short course on applications of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in land resource management for practicing professionals, extension officers and students.

The partnership between ICRISAT and UF is unique since it is envisaged to offer courses for working professionals and students in a flexible mode, allowing them to accumulate credits at their pace, and pay fees that are affordable in their national currencies. The certificates for short courses are jointly awarded by ICRISAT and the UF. Though many universities in the USA have similar courses for students in the USA, this unique partnership takes the benefits to the professionals and students in developing countries.

According to Dr William Dar, Director General of ICRISAT, the collaboration brings new strengths to delivering short courses offered by a leading American university. The earlier trend in collaboration was to exchange students and faculty. The new and emerging trend emphasizes uses technology to help students learn from off-campus and remote locations.

“Technology-mediated and collaborative learning would be the major trend in higher and continuing education in agriculture in the future,” Dr Dar said

The partnership between ICRISAT and UF will develop collaborative educational programs using innovative e-technologies to:

- Support extension, outreach, certificate and in-service training programs
- Build individual and institutional capacity through scientists and student exchange and training programs
- Provide local/regional relevant interdisciplinary short courses for training professionals in the region.

The partnership will sow the seed that can grow into a global network that fosters agricultural and environmental education. Some examples of educational activities include: watershed management, ground water remediation technologies, environmental management; water treatment technologies; soil and water borne pathogens; integrated pest management; integrated nutrient management; agricultural communication; agribusiness; agro-ecology; techniques in molecular biology; bioremediation; GIS applications to land resource management; remote sensing technologies; precision farming technologies; soil ecosystem services; and soil management.

This collaborative effort is to strengthen the capacity of the institutions in countries of South and Southeast Asia. Locally, ICRISAT and UF are also developing close working relationship with the Acharya NG Ranga Agricultural University (ANGRAU) to develop capacities of the professionals in the university.

In the first course arising from the partnership, organized recently at the Patancheru headquarters of ICRISAT, UF delegation included Prof K Ramesh Reddy, Chairman of the Soil and Water Science Department and Dr Wendy Graham, Director of the UF Water Institute. Dr Sabine Grunwald, Associate Professor in the Soil and water Sciences Department was the faculty in-charge of the course. ICRISAT's GIS technical team supported her.

ICRISAT developed a training laboratory with adequate computing facilities to support this course, which provided training on the use of geospatial technologies and spatially explicit analyses related to land resource management.

The course participants included 16 scientists from research centers of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, agricultural universities and NGOs. ANGRAU sent a delegation of four people. Senior technologists from the International Water Management Institute at Colombo also attended the course. Every participant was either self-financed or was supported by the employers. Analysis of feedback from the participants revealed very high levels of satisfaction and there is demand for similar courses.

Dr William Dar is scheduled to visit the University of Florida during the month of November 2006 to meet with the administration and the faculty to explore ways to further strengthen the collaborative programs.

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