

Spring 2015

FOCUS

THE MAGAZINE OF OSU COLLEGE OF FORESTRY



Oregon State
UNIVERSITY

Urban Forestry
It's all around the town



All around the Town

Urban forestry at OSU explores the science of greener, healthier cities

by Bryan Bernart

When you think of a classic American metropolis, what images come immediately to mind? Metallic, yellow taxicabs weaving through downtown streets? Concrete skyscrapers, cold and still, stretching ever upward? A good start, but it's missing something important. Something green and leafy.

Historically, as well as in modern times, trees have been a constant feature of the urban environment. "Consider Boston Commons and New York City's Central Park—these two city greenspaces date back to 1634 and 1857, respectively," says Paul Ries, director of the Graduate Certificate in Urban Forestry program at Oregon State. "We've been planting and caring for trees in cities as long as there have been cities."

The discipline of urban forestry emerged to teach people about the selection, planting, and long-term care of trees in the spaces where we live—cities, towns, and neighborhoods—which in turn contributes to community livability. "In the United States, 80 percent of the population lives within the incorporated boundaries of a city or

town," says Ries. "This suggests that four out of every five Americans live in an 'urban forest.'"

Given the prevalence of urban forests in the United States, it's a little surprising that urban forestry didn't appear in U.S. Federal Forest Policy until the Cooperative Forest Management Act in 1978. Rapidly making up for lost time, undergraduate degrees in urban forestry were first offered in the 1990s. OSU offers the Urban Forest Landscapes option within the Natural Resources degree program as an option for undergraduates.

In the fall of 2014, the College of Forestry launched something new: an urban forestry graduate program online. The Graduate Certificate in Urban Forestry (or GCUF) is offered exclusively through OSU Ecampus and was designed for practicing urban forestry professionals. Existing wholly in cyberspace, the GCUF attracts a more diverse student body than do traditional courses. "The flexibility of online learning offers increased access to people for whom a graduate certificate or degree would

have been unattainable in the past,” Ries says. An added benefit is that online classes, especially with participation via discussion boards, tend to “foster equal, if not greater, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction than is found in a traditional classroom.”

The breadth of the GCUF curricula reflects the highly multidisciplinary field of urban forestry: courses include urban forest planning, policy, management, green infrastructure, and urban forestry leadership, as well as electives related to natural resources. “Urban forestry, as a discipline, takes in elements of forestry, horticulture, landscape architecture, and urban planning,” Ries explains. “Most practicing urban foresters today came into it from one or more of these related fields.”

For example, Abbey Driscoll, who recently completed her master’s degree in urban forestry at OSU, studied environmental science and geology as an undergraduate. Her MS thesis work focused on collaborating with a diverse group of stakeholders to create a regional, urban forestry-focused natural resource plan for jurisdictions in the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area. Driscoll, who served as the project coordinator for the regional plan, explains that because the urban forest is a collective resource that crosses political boundaries, coordinated management can be difficult—thus necessitating a regional rather than city-specific focus when it comes to planning.

“The project tied a couple of different pieces together,” she explains. “It included a review of how local cities and counties currently manage their urban forests; a survey of community officials and program managers to discern what the needs, barriers, and priorities are to expanding these programs; and finally, collaborative workshops and forums to envision what we want our regional urban forest to look like and how we can make that happen. Our goal was to see if we could expand the capacity of local cities and organizations to address urban forest management and making an investment in our shared resource.”

Driscoll, who is now a Natural Resource Specialist in the Private Forests Program at the Oregon Department of Forestry, notes that although urban forestry includes the maintenance of trees in an urban environment, it is not all tree-focused. “It’s focused on the system, with trees, water, and groundcover, and how they all interact in an urban environment,” she says. “And when we realize that all of these things are resources that our cities depend on, and that what many people really enjoy about where they live is the natural features of that place, we understand how important urban forestry really is.”

Trees have been found to provide universal positive impacts for the environment, as well as for people who live and spend time near them, Driscoll notes. “For instance, patients with a view of trees out of their window in a hospital have been shown to recover faster, and trees in neighborhoods can help to reduce crime levels. It just goes to show that the more we learn about trees in the urban environment, the more benefits we find.”

The OSU College of Forestry has been a leader in providing forestry education for more than a century, and now it is a leader in providing urban forestry education, too.

Photos by Hannah O’Leary, OSU.



For more information about the OSU Urban Forestry graduate program, visit <http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/online-degrees/graduate/urban-forestry/>