Jim Kiser arrived at his alma mater just in time to begin a new old tradition at the College of Forestry—and one that is deeply rooted in the past: field school. Kiser, who earned his doctorate in forest science at OSU in 2009, returned to teach in the Department of Forest Engineering, Resources & Management in 2013. Two weeks before the start of fall term, he and 25 forestry undergraduates headed to the woods for 13 days of outdoor school in the forests of eastern and western Oregon.

With the success of that initial course, Forestry Field School (FE/FOR 312) is now part of the curriculum for students in the Forestry and Forest Engineering majors. As the “gateway course for students in the FE and FOR degree programs entering their first year of Professional Forestry School,” it is required for all students who move forward in those programs. As Kiser explains, the reason is to ensure that “all of our Professional School students enter the second half of their undergraduate education with a common base of forestry knowledge.”

While it may at first seem that the concept of “field school” is more-or-less self-explanatory, this course is unusual in the depth and breadth of material covered. Students spend the first seven days on the Westside of the Cascades studying surveying and ecology, aerial photos, regeneration, thinning, mature forest stands, hydrology and watersheds, and harvesting. They
then transition to the Eastside to do the same, but in a completely different setting. Students focus on only one topic every day, enabling an entirely different learning experience from the multi-tasking they’re accustomed to in normal academic life.

One objective of the Field School course is to teach students strong critical thinking skills, which are highly necessary in complex, multi-disciplinary fields like forestry. A key course objective is for students to “develop their imaginations” and learn to effectively communicate the characteristics of a forest to a third party. To accomplish this, “we ask the students to develop Sherlock Holmes-esque analytical abilities,” explains Kiser. “We teach students in such a way that they can be presented with data and information, ‘clues,’ if you will, about a given scenario in the forest, and be able to deduce ‘the story’ from them, all while demonstrating skills they’ve gained through hands-on learning.”

Although the approach taken in Forestry Field School is very similar to traditional labs in other courses, the lack of the usual classroom time constraints allows Kiser to greatly expand the experience, enabling students to participate in analyses and discussions while still in the field. An important part of each day is when students are given about 30 minutes of observation time, Kiser says. “They’re asked to walk the area and record their observations about stands, soils, vegetation, or operational concerns. In the beginning, this is a short exercise, but as each day passes, their skills with this are pushed,” which hones their concentration.

If it sounds rigorous—and some might say grueling—it is. But for these fledgling foresters, it’s also an incredible opportunity to explore the natural environments that will be an integral part of their future careers.

Finally, the course offers benefits that can’t be gained any other way: the inevitable friendships formed when students share chores, living space, and each other’s company for two whole weeks away from campus. “Students bond over some of the exercises, but mostly through the period of studying and relaxing together,” says Kiser.

In this, Forestry Field School hearkens back to the early days of the forestry program at Oregon Agricultural College when all forestry students and faculty would take to the woods each year to learn, camp out, share chores, and build camaraderie. A century later, a new version of this old tradition marks an exceptional addition to the learning experience for future foresters.

Photos (from top): Jim Kiser explains the day’s work tasks—each day students are picked to lead crews in order to start developing leadership responsibilities; students becoming competent with new instruments and field procedures; attention to detail in data collection is stressed in order to promote ownership of the data; comparing Eastside regeneration survey results with the Westside results (photo credits: Hannah O’Leary).