University of Maryland Links with National Taiwan University through Videoconferencing

In a small classroom in College Park this past spring, four UM graduate students worked closely with students in Taiwan through a new course offered by video link and Facebook. The course, Molecular Nutrition, was taught twice a week by Assistant Professor Wen-Hsing Cheng, in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (AGNR), and Drs. Ning-sing Shaw and Yi-chen Lo, professors at National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei.

Cheng, who was born and raised in Taiwan and received his B.S. degree from NTU, was the perfect candidate for this first course with the Taiwanese university. Molecular Nutrition is the first class to be offered as a result of a collaboration between UM and NTU and the second regular UM course offered that uses videoconferencing with a foreign university. The first course with videoconferencing, Environmental Issues and Culture in USA and Russia, was taught by Drs. Weismiller and Steinhilber at UM and Andrei Sorokin at Moscow State University of Environmental Engineering in Russia. It is no small coincidence that both courses were offered through the College of AGNR, which has been utilizing videoconferencing for approximately 10 years.

Last year UM, AGNR, NTU, and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States agreed to work together to develop joint courses and establish faculty and student exchanges. AGNR Dean Cheng-i Wei, a native of Taiwan, has been instrumental in reaching out to NTU and is working on bringing other UM colleges into the arrangement, as well as inviting other Taiwanese universities in being part of the consortium.

Cheng and his collaborators at NTU developed the UM/NTU course together and shared the responsibilities of “co-teaching” it. Each class was conducted by videoconference, which allowed the instructor to project documents onscreen for the students to read, while keeping the class on camera so they could see their classmates on the other side of the world.

During classes, which were taught in English, the UM students were teamed with their NTU counterparts to work on assignments. The class also set up a Facebook study group, which allowed the teachers to post their lectures online with 24-hour access. The students were also able to post items of interest to the group or ask questions about assignments.

Coming this October, Dr. Roberta Lavine in UM’s College of Education will be co-teaching the next online course with videoconferencing, Methods of Teaching English as a Second Language (ESOL), with Tamkang University. Although there are many challenges in creating a co-taught course with a foreign university—finding access to necessary technology, technical support for videoconferencing, and working with differences in both semester schedules and time zones—the pay-off provides students the expertise of faculty from both universities, the insights into other cultures, and the opportunity to make new friends. Wei believes the success of the nutrition course will open the door for more courses, providing a richer academic experience. He also hopes the foreign students will come to UM on student exchange and that UM students will go to Taiwan.

By Ann J. Leger, Coordinator International Programs in AGNR