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Jersey laptop, global reach; Online program teaches urban planners around the world

For the Bloustein Online Continuing Education Program, “Jersey Roots, Global Reach” is not just a slogan. The Internet-based classes for urban planners and other professionals regularly serve learners from around the United States and the world.

In the fall, the Urban Design Analysis class had on its student roster a lawyer from Italy, as well as planners from Poland and Canada. They joined planners and other professionals from Florida, California, Ohio and Arkansas.

“For almost a year I was looking for some education in urban studies as this is my greatest interest within spatial science where I got my Masters,” said Tomasz Gutowski, a member of the class who lives in the Polish city of Bialystok. “There was no (similar) course available in my city or even country. I could only choose academic studies which would take another 3 to 5 years.”

Gutowski and his classmate, Enrico Murtola, a lawyer in Milan, Italy, both said they enjoyed getting the perspectives of fellow professionals from so many areas. So too does the instructor, Matt Wanamaker, an urban designer for Brown & Keener in Philadelphia. They “have been among the greatest contributors to my class, both in quantity and quality of observations, commentary, and participation.”

It’s not unusual for professionals to fly around the country or from overseas to attend an event at Rutgers University, or to participate in a webconference. What makes the Bloustein Online Continuing Education Program (BOCEP) different is that students are together for at least a month. They have plenty of opportunities to discuss planning issues or share ideas.

“This input from everyone in the class was made that much more interesting by the participation of individuals from different countries,” said Nigel Baldwin, a planner in London, Ontario. “The asynchronous format of BOCEP classes allows for a conversation to take place over time and in the case of the Urban Design Analysis course it also took place over a few different countries. There is a whole new aspect that is delivered to each and every discussion when it involves so many different time zones.”

Launched in 2005 by the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, BOCEP is one of Rutgers University’s largest non-credit online continuing

education programs. Every year, it offers more than 20 classes in community development and social justice, economic development and real estate, planning law and legal issues, professional practice, smart growth and sustainable development, and urban design and placemaking. The courses are taught by seasoned practitioners and designed for professionals around the United States. BOCEP has received more than 500 registrations in little more than three years. It is on track to have more than 200 enrollments this year.

Less than a third of the learners are from New Jersey. The vast majority are from the United States, but there have been participants from Spain, Italy, Argentina and Hong Kong. At least two American military personnel stationed in Iraq at the time took BOCEP courses.

There are no required meetings in BOCEP courses, but there is a good deal of interaction among learners and instructors. As in a typical university class, learners read materials and get lectures or guiding comments from instructors. Then they have “windows” of a few days where they can respond to questions and discuss matters with one another. In some cases, learners work collaboratively on projects, as they would in an urban planning studio course. BOCEP classes are taught at a graduate level, and all learners are expected to participate and share their knowledge.

Courses cost \$295 each, though many learners get scholarships of \$50 to \$100. BOCEP is produced and managed by the Bloustein School’s Professional Development Institute.

BOCEP was created to meet several purposes. For the Bloustein School, it was an opportunity to further its mission by providing high quality professional development to more planning and public policy professionals. For founder Leonardo Vazquez, Professional Development Institute Director, BOCEP helps further his mission of increasing diversity and equity in planning.

“Having better knowledge can help you make better planning decisions and help your career, said Vazquez, who has been a planning practitioner for more than a decade. “Unfortunately, the traditional models of training in the planning field tend to favor those who are wealthier, can take more time from work, or have easy access to the cities where traditional training takes place. BOCEP was designed to make high quality continuing education accessible and cost-effective for a greater number of professionals.”

For more information about BOCEP, visit <http://www.policy.rutgers.edu/bocep>