

Env. Sci 310/550 -- Stella or Vensim?

Both Stella and Vensim are excellent programs for dynamic modeling, and both are explained and used in *Modeling the Environment: 2nd Edition*. You can select either program for this course. Previous students' experiences may help you decide which software is best for you.

Stella has been selected more often by **undergraduates**. They preferred Stella because there are more Stella examples in the book. The on-line support for Stella is outstanding. The explanations are easy to find, extremely detailed, and well illustrated. Stella is installed in the Webster Hall, Room 1149 (the undergraduate students' computer lab for the School of the Environment).

You may purchase your own copy of Stella at <http://www.iseesystems.com>. (Let me know if you plan to purchase your own copy so I can provide isee systems with a list of student names). As of August 2010, Stella was available to students in a scheduled class @ \$59 for a six-month student license and @ \$129 for a regular student copy. It is available for both Macs and Windows computers.

Vensim has been selected by a good fraction of the **graduate students**. Vensim is appealing at the outset since the PLE (Personal Learning Edition) can be downloaded for free. Vensim provides a wide variety of features that students find particularly useful when they become accustomed to system dynamics simulation. For example, many students appreciate the "Synthesim" tool. Other students are impressed by Vensim's ability to perform comprehensive sensitivity analysis (Appendix D). Although students will find more Stella examples in the book, there are plenty of Vensim examples, and the book provides some step-by-step instruction on Vensim. I believe more time is needed to learn Vensim than Stella.¹ The Vensim on-line help is not as extensive, and it is not as clearly illustrated. On the other hand, Vensim comes with more features, and they add to the learning challenges for the beginning student.

You may obtain your own copy of Vensim at <http://www.vensim.com/>. The PLE version is free and is well suited for a first class in modeling. Some previous students started with PLE and "graduated" to PLE Plus. As of August 2010, the commercial version of PLE Plus was available for \$169. The price for academic users was \$89. Vensim is available for both Macs and Windows computers. Advanced analysis (as described in Appendices E & F) requires the DSS version of Vensim.

Learning Stella or Vensim Together:

Both programs are fun to learn, especially if you work alongside of your classmates in a group. The Thursday afternoon lab sessions (Webster 1149) provide weekly opportunities for Env Sci 310 students to learn the software together.

Env Sci 550 does not have a required lab session. But graduate students can also learn faster if they have an opportunity to work together. We'll discuss informal options to bring graduate students together for some shared learning. One option is to meet on-line via "GoToMeeting." Students can join the meeting from their own locations (at home, their WSU office, their UofI office, etc) and they will see what is on my computer. GoToMeeting allows me to transfer the "presenter" role to any student, and all of us can see what is on the student's computer.

¹ This is my opinion. Some of my colleagues tell me that that Vensim is easier to learn. Our opinions may be shaped by which software we learned first and which text we are using in a class.