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Workshop Promotes Values of Sustainability Among IWU Faculty, Staff

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Ken Detloff (right), assistant manager of grounds services at Illinois Wesleyan, tells workshop participants about efforts--and obstacles--for the use of environmentally friendly methods in maintaining campus grounds.

Workshop Promotes Values of Sustainability Among IWU Faculty, Staff

June 9, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – It's an overcast day in early June and an Illinois Wesleyan biology professor has just caught a small water snake at the edge of Evergreen Lake. The young son of a colleague stands nearby, transfixed, petting the reptile's soft skin. Soon, Biology Chair Given Harper is surrounded by a crowd of Illinois Wesleyan faculty and staff admiring his catch--and later watching the released animal swim away into the lake waters.

The small assembly has just braved rainy skies to explore the lake by canoe, an outdoor adventure that followed two days of intense, mostly indoor education and discussion about integrating the values of sustainability into IWU classrooms and campus life. Participants toured the campus to learn about sustainability efforts and obstacles, and visited a nearby organic farm and the Children's Discovery Museum in Normal, Ill., which was built to meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) "green building" standards.

Keynote speaker Dr. Anthony Cortese, president of the nonprofit organization Second Nature, taught workshop participants not to use the limiting phrase "environmental sustainability," but instead to embrace holistic concepts of sustainability in social, economic and ecological terms--based on principles of protecting human health, economic opportunity, and fair and stable social systems, as well as the earth's ecological diversity and integrity.

The 40 participants were each asked to develop a project for incorporating sustainability concepts into their courses or their campus work. Volunteers will meet again on Monday, Aug. 7, to present their finished proposals.

The workshop was intended to help implement the University's mission and vision statements and strategic plan, with the ultimate goal of educating and motivating students as leaders in creating a just and sustainable world.

During workshop discussions, faculty and staff realized that sustainability could be connected to other core values of the University's mission and not be seen as separate from concepts of social justice, diversity and global understanding--all of which relate to humans' interconnectedness. The overall goal is to help students be good citizens, aware of their impact on society, noted participant Kira Hudson Banks, assistant professor of psychology.

To live sustainably, Cortese said, resources should be used at a rate that doesn't exceed their regeneration--in other words, "living off nature's income, instead of its capital." To Cortese, it's not enough to drive a fuel-efficient car. Recognizing that the world's supply of fossil fuels is finite, alternative sources of energy must soon be embraced. Workshop co-convenor Steve Hoffman, assistant professor of chemistry and environmental studies, said that by some estimates, proven domestic oil reserves will last as few as 11 years at current usage rates.

Co-convenor Abigail Jahiel, associate professor of environmental and international studies, said the American model of economic success in terms of growth and consumption is not sustainable in the long term, which is becoming especially evident as the huge population in developing China attempts to follow our lead. Participants discussed ways to embody a value system that doesn't follow the cultural paradigm of continually acquiring more and more.

Said Cortese, "We're the first generation that has the ability to determine the habitability of the planet," noting that the current pattern of "develop first, worry later" cannot be sustained indefinitely.

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