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New UI institute to focus on environmental efforts on, off campus

Sun, 11/03/2013 - 8:00am | [Christine Des Garennes](#) ^[1]

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CHAMPAIGN — Throughout the decades, several different committees, offices and centers at the University of Illinois have launched with intentions of greening the campus and bettering the environment — and many have come and gone.

The most recent iteration, which evolved from campus planning exercises led by Chancellor Phyllis Wise, promises to boost environmental efforts on campus and in the surrounding cities, promote education and outreach in sustainability and support research in broad areas from agriculture to water.

The Center for a Sustainable Environment, soon to be the Institute for Sustainability, Energy and the Environment pending approval from the UI Board of Trustees and Illinois Board of Higher Education, is the new campus-level unit that debuted last month.

"Our vision is to create a scholarly institute on par with the other major institutes on campus — the Beckman Institute, the Prairie Research Institute, the Institute for Genomic Biology, all of which are under the office of the vice chancellor for research," said Evan DeLucia, a UI ecologist who has been head of the Department of Plant Biology and director of the School of Integrative Biology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Wise named him director earlier this fall.

In the coming months, DeLucia will be working with a steering committee to pin down the institute's five major research themes — which he said should address globally significant challenges, leverage the strengths of the campus and create a new niche.

Launching with a \$500,000 annual budget, with money coming from a private family foundation and the campus, DeLucia envisions partnering with nongovernmental organizations and private industry on projects and the budget eventually growing to about \$1.5 million a year. He wants it to become self-supporting in three years.



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Photo by: Rick Danzl/The News-Gazette
Evan DeLucia.

Also, in the coming months, he will focus on working with the UI Foundation, the university's fundraising arm, as well as campus development officers to seek donations and grants to support the institute.

"Once we get through the early stages, where we're forming the institute, a real big part will be fueling the institute," he said.

Moving from a center to an institute indicates that the unit is a "campuswide research enterprise," a unit "not owned by any academic department," he said.

A professor at the UI for 27 years, DeLucia acknowledged there have been many environmental-focused centers and initiatives over the years "with varying degrees of success."

"None had national visibility," he said. And oftentimes, "ownership" was an issue, he said. For example, if an entity was housed in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences may not have been inclined to participate.

Lack of coordination among researchers, college fundraisers and others has been an issue in the past, said Wes Jarrell, former director of the UI's Environmental Change Institute and emeritus professor from the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Studies in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.

Launched in 2008, the Environmental Change Institute focused on global environmental issues. When it was operating, the institute supported research, held symposia and sponsored other outreach programs.

"We had some success there," Jarrell said about the ECI, but it suffered from what he described as a fractured grass-roots movement, meaning "independent people wanting to do independent things does not always result in strong synergies," he said.

The new Institute for Sustainability, Energy and Environment will be funded in part by a donation from the Alvin H. Baum Family Fund, which previously supported the Environmental Change Institute.

Jarrell said he is optimistic about the new institute, given its place in the vice chancellor for research's office and DeLucia's vision that encompasses research, education and outreach.

In the past, Jarrell said, "it felt like the university didn't exploit all the opportunities in this area, from development (fundraising) to teaching and research not being very well coordinated." He is, however, confident Wise believes this area of research in sustainability, energy and the environment does have potential to attract funding and raise the university's status.

The idea for the new institute grew out of Wise's "visioning future excellence" process that involved asking faculty, staff, students and others to consider society's most pressing challenges in the future and how the university could address those challenges. After brainstorming sessions, focus groups and meetings, six themes emerged, including energy and environment. The report that evolved from that process recommended creating an energy, environment and sustainability institute to coordinate and lead interdisciplinary efforts, including research and industry partnerships.

DeLucia intends for the new institute to be "inclusive" and said he does not want it to compete with academic units, but rather promote academic units on campus.

When discussing the new institute, he described a three-legged stool, with one leg being major, "actionable" research that takes on those "grand societal challenges"; another leg being education and outreach, including courses offered by various departments; and the third being campus and community sustainability, which could include, for example, revising the campus climate action plan that calls for the Urbana-Champaign campus to be carbon neutral by 2050.

As a Ph.D. student in the Department of Natural Resource and Environmental Sciences for more than six years, Eric Green is familiar with the various sustainability efforts that have surfaced over the years, such as the Environmental Council, which supported research, teaching and service programs in the environment, and the Office of Sustainability, which focused mostly on campus efforts. He's also seen some projects scuttled, such as the wind turbine that students wanted built south of campus.

Last year, a group of students voiced their concerns to Wise and called for the creation of a high-ranking official, such as a vice chancellor for sustainability, who would specifically work in this area. Although that has not happened, Green said he's looking forward to working with DeLucia.

"It sounds like he'll have the chancellor's ear. Students need a powerful voice and it sounds like (DeLucia) has that power. That's what we wanted," Green said.

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