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Intelligent Growth

Undergrad program, Farm part of new Center for Regional Environmental Studies

On an unseasonably cool summer day, Dr. Robert Kingsolver offered a few staff members an informal tour of a one-acre plot of land behind the Bellarmine Office Building at 2120 Newburg Road. Pointing to a gentle slope, he described the orchard he envisions in the space and traced the pattern of small yellow flags that indicate future homes for perennial beds, vegetable patches and a cut-flower garden.

Bellarmino is embracing one of the major components of Vision 2020, its long-term plan for intelligent growth - Global Environment and Sustainability - with the creation of a Center for Regional Environmental Studies.

The center, announced this summer by President Joseph J. McGowan, will support a new undergraduate program in environmental studies, campus-wide initiatives in environmental sustainability, new research agendas and a new Bellarmine Farm. The program will prepare students to take advantage of the increase in environmental technology and management jobs, as well as to approach business with a stronger environmental conscience.

Dr. Kingsolver, who had been Bellarmine College dean, is the founding dean and director of the new center. Dr. Bill Fenton, current chair of the mathematics department, will serve as interim dean of Bellarmine College for the 2009-10 academic year, during which time the university will carry out a search for Kingsolver's successor.

Kingsolver took a few minutes from his very busy transition schedule to explain a little more about the center and what it means to the Bellarmine community.

By **TABATHA T. THOMPSON**
tthompson@bellarmine.edu

Q: Could you provide a brief overview of the center?

A: We'll have two primary functions. One is to develop academic programs in the area of environmental studies, which would include both environmental sciences and social sciences that contribute to an understanding of society and our interaction with the world, and the consequences of that. Environmental sciences is very inclusive; it's an integrated discipline.

It is appropriately housed in a liberal arts institution like ours. We have a lot of academic elements in place to develop a really first-class program in environmental studies.

The other half of the job is to help the university carry out sustainability initiatives, to try to walk the walk, so to speak, in living the way we believe is necessary in order to sustain a viable, healthy environment for us and generations to come. A university is really a highly concentrated town, so anything a municipality would think about, we have to think about. Since we're trying to become a regional leader, it behooves us to be out ahead of the curve a little and show how things are going to be done.

Q: How will the program grow?

A: That's one of the appeals for us in creating an integrated curriculum. We already have an environmental chemistry course, an Earth sciences program, and in biology, we have an environmental health science course and ecology, and a natural history or field course. I'll work with faculty colleagues to take advantage of their expertise. We have a lot of people with really good ideas. I want to bring all those ideas together for a program collaborative in nature.

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Q: When can students first start to enroll in an environmental studies program?

A: A minor will come first. As a forecast on my part, I believe we could offer that in the spring of next year (2010). A year after that, a major would be in the works. I have to put it before the faculty, to hopefully be ready for fall 2010. Depending on student interest and enrollment, we'll know how soon to develop certificate or graduate programs. Part of my job will be to work with environmental agencies, as well as private and government employers, to see what kind of need there is on the placement side after students graduate. That will give us information about what kinds of certificates would be helpful.

Q: What can you say about the Bellarmine Farm and its connection to the center?

A: Dr. McGowan has asked me to help plan this and come up with something that's workable for our community. It is a challenge to develop a horticultural operation with students when students are absent for much of the agricultural year — the summer. But we have a lot of staff, community and faculty who are interested. I would envision a small demonstration garden this fall in preparation of a master plan with a larger garden with some of the hardscape going in the first year. My vision for the Bellarmine gardens is to have more than one function. That is, part of the Bellarmine Farm should be teaching gardens, research plots, outdoor classrooms and some walking paths. We're bringing a new community resource that will do lots of different kinds of things.

Q: What are some of the immediate benefits of the farm and gardens?

A: As a biology teacher, I've always found that to be useful to students. They have a better intuitive understanding of living things if they've helped with growing things. So, there's a large educational component to that. One of the first priorities will be to get students in touch with their own food system. We live in an age when people believe that food comes in plastic packages from the grocery store and people aren't really aware of what goes into food production. They don't have that direct experience that their grandparents and maybe even parents had.



Q: How will the center involve the community?

A: We would be very interested in partnering with the city - for example, the mayor's bicycle initiative, as well as more walkable neighborhoods. We're in a wonderful, walkable neighborhood here in the Highlands, but it could be safer and more conducive to foot traffic. We would like to make better use of the city bus system, rather than driving hundreds of cars to campus and using so much of our green space for parking.

Q: Could you explain how the center fits in with Kentucky's agricultural history?

A: The future in Kentucky is for more diversity in agriculture. I think Bellarmine can play a role in building regional consciousness and putting urban people in touch with farming systems that feed them, and also giving rural people within our region an opportunity to develop economically. Wendell Berry talks about urban-rural partnerships as being very important, and we're in an ideal location for that.

Q: Any thoughts to end the discussion?

A: Everything that you do has an impact, so we have to think through all those processes and create high quality of life and low environmental impact at the same time. **BU**

For more on Dr. Kingsolver and the Bellarmine Farm, visit www.bellarmino.edu/video

More farm photos at www.bellarmino.edu/about/photos.

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