Frances Westley to Lead Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies

The University of Wisconsin–Madison has selected a new director for the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, Chancellor John Wiley has announced. Frances Westley, who will take over the position in January 2005, currently is James McGill Chair of Strategy, executive director of the McGill-McConnell Program for Voluntary Sector Leaders and professor of strategy in the Faculty of Management at McGill University in Montreal.

“Frances Westley is a proven team builder who will effectively lead the Nelson Institute,” Wiley says. “She has a wonderful ability to solve problems through interdisciplinary collaboration, which is key to identifying and overcoming barriers to conservation and developing environmentally sustainable ways to meet human needs.”

In turn, Westley says she was attracted to UW–Madison by its record of problem solving through collaboration. “The University of Wisconsin has long led the way in environmental research as well as in developing creative approaches to working with communities of concerned practitioners to solve environmental problems,” Westley says. “On my early visits, the quality of the students and the faculty, the caliber of the programs, and the administration’s commitment to innovation and excellence proved irresistible.”

Westley, a sociologist by training, says she has long been passionately committed to conservation. After joining McGill, that interest became focused on interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration. “It seemed to me that humans already had much of the necessary technology, knowledge and resources for solving many of the world’s environmental problems,” she says. “They just weren’t being used to that end. The greatest challenge to conservation seemed to lie in understanding why this is so, and in addressing the cognitive and social barriers to collaboration at all levels.”

In her recent book, *Experiments in Consilience*, Westley argues that while the dynamics of political and social systems can represent significant barriers to conservation, real progress is being made in understanding and overcoming disciplinary barriers, as well as those separating theory from practice.

“What excites me about the Gaylord Nelson Institute is that it is precisely focused on the important challenge of building interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial collaboration in order to put good science to work. And it has a 30-year head start and a track record of accomplishments to build on,” Westley says.

The Institute for Environmental Studies was created in 1970 to promote and enhance interdisciplinary environmental instruction, research and outreach. The institute was renamed in 2002 in honor of former Wisconsin governor and U.S. senator Gaylord Nelson, a lifelong champion of environmental stewardship and the founder of Earth Day.

Approximately 150 professors from more than 50 UW–Madison departments are affiliated with the institute, which administers several degree and certificate programs. The institute also houses three research centers and offers more than 100 courses in cooperation with the university’s schools and colleges.

Erhard Joeres, professor of civil and environmental engineering, professor of environmental studies, and chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, has served as interim director of the Nelson Institute since

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January 2003 when former director Thomas Yuill retired.

“I am delighted that Professor Westley will become the new director of the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies,” Joeres says. “We know that under her leadership the institute will flourish. She will bring an exciting new vision for our faculty, staff and students, which is needed if we are to deal with the multiplying complexity of environmental problems in our world.”

Westley has considerable experience working across sectors and trying out her ideas in practice. While at McGill, she helped to develop McGill’s School for the Environment, serving on the Executive of the School for five years and acting as a Theme Leader for Sustainability and the Global Environment. She designed and taught a course for MBA students at McGill, titled Strategies for Sustainability, and has consulted with private sector organizations about sustainability and innovation.

She has also served on many boards of science-based environmental organizations including the IUCN-The World Conservation Union’s (formerly the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, the Science Board of the Resilience Alliance, the Bedford Institute’s Centre for Marine Biology, the Canadian Biodiversity Institute and Evergreen. She has also designed workshop and training processes for environmental scientists and managers all over the world. Most recently, she designed and led the McGill-McConnell Program for Voluntary Sector Leaders, a master’s degree program for leaders in the not-for-profit sector in Canada, including many environmental NGOs and INGOs (non-governmental and international non-governmental organizations).

“These experiences have convinced me that real collaboration, across disciplines, organizations and sectors, is possible,” she says. “If we can build that — and couple it with good science — real innovation and lasting solutions are within our grasp. It is a prize worth reaching for, and I can think of no better place to do it than at the Nelson Institute.”

Doris Duke Fellowships Awarded

Four Nelson Institute graduate students will share Doris Duke Conservation Fellowships in 2004–05. Julia Brauer, Kerrie Cunningham, Jill Leary, and Amy Martin will receive $3,750 each for internships this summer and be given project assistantships for the coming academic year. Those who work for a nonprofit organization or a public agency after graduate school also may be eligible for financial assistance to repay student loans.

The fellowships are supported by a grant to the Nelson Institute from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which chooses universities for conservation fellowship grants based on their “superior interdisciplinary environmental programs and commitment to educating conservation practitioners.” Several Duke fellowships have been awarded annually to Nelson Institute graduate students since 2001–02.

In the News?

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Fifty independent land trusts operate in Wisconsin, collectively protecting 125,000 acres of privately owned land. They’re scattered around the state, protecting wildlife habitat, scenic views and rural landscapes. But these disparate conservation efforts are becoming parts of a comprehensive vision, thanks to the Gathering Waters Conservancy, an umbrella organization that supports, connects and guides the work of Wisconsin’s non-profit land trusts.

“These are primarily community-based organizations that specialize in land protection,” says Gathering Waters executive director Vicki Elkin. “Over the last five years, we’ve really seen dramatic growth both in the number we support and the amount of land they’re protecting.”

Elkin, who earned a master’s degree in the Nelson Institute’s Land Resources Program in 1998, says her organization works at all levels, advising individual landowners, acting as a land trust itself when necessary, providing technical support to local trusts, coordinating their efforts, and lobbying the state legislature.

“We advocate for policies that support land conservation,” she explains. “For example, last year we led the successful fight during the budget process to protect the Stewardship Fund, the state’s land-acquisition account. It’s been at $60 million the last couple of years; the legislature wanted to cut it by 90 percent, but we were really involved in the effort to mobilize public support on behalf of stewardship.”

That campaign prompted newspapers around the state to publish editorials in favor of the Stewardship Fund, and the cuts were averted.

Ten Years and Counting

Gathering Waters is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year, and Elkin has been its director for the last six. She’s overseen its vigorous growth.

“When I started, I was the only employee, and I soon hired another IES graduate part time, Travis Olson (M.S., CBSD 98), and we’ve grown ever since. We have five full-time employees and a couple half-time now,” she says.

Nelson Institute alumni and faculty also played a major role in the organization’s beginnings. Professor Emeritus Harold “Bud” Jordahl and 1977 Water Resources Management alumnus William O’Connor were among its founders. Elkin estimates that as many as 20 institute alumni and students have worked for or interned with Gathering Waters.

The group has succeeded by finding a niche within the state’s private conservation movement: serving as an umbrella organization for those 50 trusts and their 45,000 members.

“We’re trying to help local land trusts be more strategic and more focused on priorities. If we’re going to make a difference on the landscape, we need a coordinated strategy with clear goals. We don’t just want to protect a patchwork; we need to work with land trusts and their partners to figure out the best places for them to work,” says Elkin.

One such effort has led to the creation of a regional project called “Partners in Preservation,” which operates along Lake Michigan from Door County to Kenosha. Eight trusts have joined to protect lands with the highest natural values.

“We brought all the land trusts together with key partners like the Nature Conservancy, the state Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, anyone who’s doing conservation in that area, and we overlaid all their maps and plans and talked about who was already doing what where, where the gaps were, where land trusts should focus their work. We produced something called ‘Landscapes of Opportunity,’ which all the land trusts are adopting. They’ve agreed to work on specific places in their local areas so that we can have a much greater impact on the basin as a whole,” Elkin says. “It’s really exciting.”

Public or Private?

Wisconsin has a reputation as a conservation-minded state, with programs such as the Stewardship Fund, founded by former Sen. Gaylord Nelson and former Gov. Warren Knowles, designed to acquire fragile lands. Why should private groups carry the load?

“Because we’re losing some of our most precious places every day,” says Elkin. “People see the landscapes around them changing. Places they’ve always loved are suddenly converted to residential or commercial use. They want to take action, and land trusts allow citizens, working directly with private landowners, to permanently protect some of these places.”

Elkin says many landowners don’t want to work with government agencies but are open to overtures from

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By Tom Sinclair

A towering, sunlit atrium with an undulating webbed ceiling. A plant-covered roof with a tracking solar array. A lofty “rainfall stair” that catches storm water to irrigate the surrounding landscape. A Greek-style amphitheater for outdoor events.

Ask a group of creative students to envision your dream home, and they may surprise you with features like these.

At the invitation of Nelson Institute interim director Erhard Joeres, UW–Milwaukee professor Jim Wasley challenged each of the students in his advanced architecture studio last fall to design a new, environmentally friendly building at UW–Madison for the Nelson Institute. By year’s end, they had produced ten conceptual designs with dramatically different personalities.

One reaches out from the shore of Lake Mendota in a narrow, graceful s-curve. Another recedes into a hillside in a series of low, arcing terraces. A third lies partially underground beneath a grassy roof with protruding hoods for natural light and ventilation. A fourth sports a row of cottages on stilts. All practice basic “green building” design principles: use energy efficiently, promote good health, and conserve natural resources.

Wasley’s students unveiled their ideas to an audience of about 75 people from the campus and community in February at the Pyle Center. For their presentation, the students created detailed posters for all of their designs and an impressive scale model of the heart of the UW–Madison campus with miniature, removable versions of each design.

While the architecture group grappled with visions of buildings, a landscape architecture class taught by UW–Madison professor James LaGro conducted a thorough inventory and analysis of the prospective site, now a large parking lot west of Elizabeth Waters Hall between Observatory Hill and the Lakeshore Path.

Joeres described the student projects as a valuable step in the process of “educating ourselves and others about green buildings.”
Thirty-four years after its establishment in 1970, the Nelson Institute still has no real home of its own. Its offices, laboratories, and classrooms are scattered across the campus in facilities built for other purposes and often shared with unrelated units. Its allotted space, already tight, allows no room for growth.

Joeres obtained necessary approval from the Campus Planning Committee last year to begin planning and pursuing funds for a new building that would bring all of the institute’s academic, research, and outreach programs and administrative offices under one roof for the first time.

As currently conceived, the facility also would house several related units in need of better space, including the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, the Department of Landscape Architecture, and the Land Information and Computer Graphics Facility. It might even offer a modest number of cooperative residential units for students.

“The university administration agrees that we ought to have a building, which is a great affirmation for us,” says Joeres. “But they’re also quite excited about moving in the green building direction and having the Nelson Institute be in the vanguard.”

He adds that the institute has two objectives in seeking a green building for its future home: “One is to have a building that can serve as an example of minimal environmental impact. The second, especially appropriate to who we are, is to integrate this building programmatically as a teaching device.”

At costs comparable to those of a conventional structure, the building and grounds themselves would serve as a practical model of environmentally sustainable design and as a laboratory for environmental teaching, research, and outreach. Rough estimates place the price of such a building at about $30 million, most of which, because of today’s economic realities, would have to come from private sources.

“We have gotten approval for a green building in the future,” says Joeres. “That gives us the go-ahead to seek out folks who would be interested in seeing this happen and helping this along with a signature gift.”

Meanwhile, Wasley expects to be back in Madison this fall with a fresh group of architecture students to explore other possible building designs for the Nelson Institute.

“This is an ongoing collaboration,” he says. “In the future, we will be looking at what might be done at additional sites on the UW–Madison campus.”
The Nelson Institute’s flagship graduate degree program drew high praise from the leader of UW–Madison’s Graduate School recently following the first comprehensive review of the program since the mid–1980s.

Dean Martin Cadwallader cited the Land Resources Program, in a letter to program chair Steve Ventura, for its “enviable level of excellence.”

Cadwallader noted that it attracts “first-rate” students and displays an “impressive commitment” from a wide range of faculty members across the campus.

An independent faculty committee that convened last year to evaluate the Land Resources Program also had many good things to say.

“The greatest strength of the program is its truly interdisciplinary nature, preparing students to bring natural and social science perspectives to bear on environmental problems,” according to the committee’s report. “In our estimation Land Resources provides a model of how such interdisciplinary training can be achieved.”

The five member committee, co-chaired by professors Jane Collins (rural sociology/women’s studies/environmental studies) and Shiela Reaves (life sciences communication), lauded the land resources curriculum and requirements for “giving students tremendous flexibility in designing programs that meet their own needs.”

The committee based its findings on a self-study of the program completed in 2001 as well as on interviews with students, faculty and staff members, a survey of recent alumni, student data, and the program’s handbook.

Land Resources is easily the largest of the Nelson Institute’s graduate programs. Annual enrollment averages roughly 100, split about evenly between master’s-degree and doctoral students. (Enrollment peaked at more than 160 before admission standards were tightened a decade ago.) Well over 500 students have earned degrees in land resources since the program’s introduction in 1976.

While applauding the program’s strengths, both the self-study group and the review committee called for improvements in faculty advising.

“Some students have difficulty finding an advisor whose areas of interest match their own, or in convincing such faculty (members)—once identified—to take on additional students,” noted the review committee. “Some students identified the task of finding an advisor and putting together a committee as the biggest challenge they faced.”

The committee attributed the problem to the fact that most professors involved in the program are volunteers from other academic departments, where they already have full-time commitments.

A shortage of university financial support for land resources graduate students is another persistent concern.

The establishment of new, privately funded graduate fellowships for Nelson Institute students in recent years has helped. Still, nearly half of all land resources students receive no tuition-remitting fellowships or assistantships and must find other ways to finance their education.

Nevertheless, “by all of the measures and indicators we looked at, the Land Resources Program appears to attract an extremely strong group of students,” said the review committee. “These students are not only competitive in measures such as standardized exams and grade point averages, but bring a wealth of experience and clear goals to their programs.”

Furthermore, the committee added, “the overwhelming majority of alumni appear to be finding jobs related to their degree, with a good mix of positions in public service, university teaching, not-for-profit agencies, and the private sector.” And according to the self-study, more than 80 percent of those who responded to a survey of recent alumni said the program met or exceeded their expectations.

Reviewers Give Enthusiastic ‘Thumbs Up’ to Land Resources Program

Former U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson was among four eminent UW–Madison alumni to receive this year’s Wisconsin Alumni Association Distinguished Alumni Awards.

Nelson received his UW–Madison law degree in 1942. In 1958, he was elected governor of Wisconsin. He served two terms, then spent 18 years in the U.S. Senate. One of his best-known achievements is the founding of Earth Day on April 22, 1970. On that first Earth Day, nearly 20 million Americans took to the streets in support of creating a sustainable society. In 1995, Nelson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given to civilians in the United States.

Others receiving the award were “Malcolm in the Middle” actress Jane Kaczmarek; Toshiba President Tadashi Okamura; and philanthropist Joan Edelman Spero, president of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.
Elena Bennett (M.S., LR 99) has been selected by the Soil Ecology Section of the Ecological Society of America as the recipient of the Award for Best Presentation by a Graduate Student. Bennett is a doctoral student in the Limnology and Marine Sciences Graduate Program at UW–Madison and will complete her degree this year.

Her presentation of work, done in conjunction with Prof. Stephen Carpenter, was titled “Human and Natural Impact on Soil Phosphorus Accumulation in an Urbanizing Agricultural Watershed.”

“This is the first time a limnologist’s research as been so honored by the Soil Ecology Section,” according to James Kitchell, director of the UW–Madison Center for Limnology. “That represents a uniquely important linkage between land use and water quality for the Madison lakes. We’re proud that one of our students is leading the way in this important effort.”

Bennett’s ESA recognition included a cash award.

Jeff Gersh (M.S., LR 88) has written and directed a series of programs for Home and Garden TV (HGTV) called “Dream House,” shown Monday evenings on the cable network. Each episode chronicles the experiences of people seeking to build the ideal home from foundation to finish.

Gersh is a documentary film maker whose productions include “Subdivide and Conquer,” a film about suburban sprawl in the American West (visit www.bullfrogfilms.com for information). “Dream House” is his first television production. See www.hgtv.com for local air times.

New Alumni
Doctorate: Glen Barry, Yazon Gnounou and Milford Muskett, all in land resources.

Master’s Degrees: Emily Kathol, Sarah Kinney, April Sansom, Rachel Sohmer and Andrea Young, conservation biology and sustainable development; Cassandra Garcia, Victor Waldron and Yeon You, environmental monitoring; Andrea Lasker, Erin O’Brien and David Reiley, land resources; and Neil Derkowski and Ezra Meyer, water resources management.

Undergraduate Certificates: Chad Abel, Joshua Amata, Amy Baier, Cara Burke, Adam Duchesneau, Joseph Farris, Katie Jo Greene, Sarah Grzelak, Patrick Harrigan, Brian Heikinen, Philipp Hoechst, Bruce Kiesling, Matthew Koppenhaver, Charu Kukreja, Daniel Mrotek, Matthew Nolan, Sujata Patel, Steve Penn, Robert Potter Jr., Lucy Rahn, Brian Schreier, Katherine Sharrow, Eric Sherman, Susan Tierney, Jessica Turner, Trisha Vanatta, Lara Vojnov, Kame Westerman, Michél Weston, Danielle Wood and Amanda Zellmer.

Your turn . . .

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