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Gift of $20 million helps launch Georgetown Environment Initiative

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Nov. 7, 2012 Eco Catholic
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A $20 million gift is expected to help boost Georgetown University's profile as a major center for environmental education and research.

The gift from an anonymous donor affiliated with the school launches the Georgetown Environment Initiative, which university officials said will advance the interdisciplinary study of the environment in relation to society and stewardship of natural resources.

"The plan is to lead through the example of scholarship," said Matthew B. Hamilton, associate professor of biology and faculty chairman of the initiative.

The initiative will bring together students and faculty from across a wide cross section of campus life to study the environment in an effort to better understand how the well-being of people intersects with the health of the natural world, Hamilton said.

The Jesuit university plans to hire three science faculty members who are leaders in their field to conduct interdisciplinary research on the environment.

Students also will benefit through the establishment of additional scholarships and stipends for research under the initiative, Hamilton said.

The announcement of the initiative Nov. 1 came on the heels of the opening this fall of Regents Hall, a $100 million, 154,000-square-foot teaching and research center housing most of the university's biology, chemistry and physics faculty.

Bart Moore, Georgetown's vice president for advancement, told Catholic News Service on Tuesday the gift sets the stage for the school to become a leader in approaching the study of the environment from different perspectives other than the sciences.

"The study of the environment is a field that seems to have resisted a true interdisciplinary approach. If ever there was an issue for interdisciplinary study, it's the environment," Moore explained.

How the environment fares has implications for public policy, economics, law, business, the sciences and international relations, and the initiative will allow researchers from Georgetown's three campuses to better understand the factors that affect it, he added.

"We have a chance to do this and make a contribution to this field," he said.

The gift also will allow the university to fund research projects related to the study of the environment by individual faculty members.

Moore said school officials are eyeing the opening of an on-campus center for professors and students to meet and study together and develop a seminar series to bring leaders from around the world to discuss environmental science, research and policy.

Concern for the environment has been a primary focus at Georgetown for several years. University President John J. DeGioia has pledged to cut campus greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2020. Since 2006 the university's carbon footprint has decreased by nearly 20 percent, the school reported.

Such efforts are key ingredients of church teaching about environmental justice and in the tradition of Jesuit education, Hamilton said.

"It's Catholic identity. The initiative offers a general set of themes ... that are universal with everyone," he said.

The gift was made as part of the university's $1.5 billion capital campaign. It is the largest gift supporting the campaign's strategic initiatives.

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