Thoreau Foundation Grant Transforms GreenHouse

By Sarah Zobel

Walter Poleman

The GreenHouse Residential Learning Community annually provides some 250 UVM students the opportunity to learn about sustainability while living in an interdisciplinary community. Residents agree to abide by an "Ecological Code of Values" that encourages the efforts at conservation, energy efficiency, local food choices, and reuse that are staples of green living everywhere. But students who live in the GreenHouse—something all undergraduates are invited to do for up to two years—must also enroll in courses on ecology of place and ecological citizenship that reinforce the concepts of conscious living and place.

Now, thanks to a $35,000 grant from the Henry David Thoreau Foundation that was matched by the Rubenstein School for a total of $70,000, the GreenHouse is poised to become an ecological design "collaboratory." Coined by Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources Dean Jon D. Erickson, the term underscores the association that will take place among resident students and three community partners: Shelburne Farms, Vermont Design Institute, and Yestermorrow Design-Build School. Shelburne Farms is already collaborating with UVM through the Place-based Landscape Analysis and Community Engagement (PLACE) Program, whose goal is to promote sustainable relationships between people and their local landscapes and is currently focused on Burlington. Professor Walter Poleman, GreenHouse faculty director and PLACE program director, said both programs focus on "how we live well locally," which is the essence of ecological design.

Under the grant, the three community partners will provide skills-based mentorships and source materials for the many anticipated student projects that will become part of the GreenHouse infrastructure, including new furniture. A design competition will give students the opportunity to work in teams of four with guidance from a mentor in tackling challenges such as construction of a greenhouse from recycled materials.

"There's been a strong interest in ecological design at UVM," Poleman said. "It just hasn't had a home, per se, so we will use the facility here together with this programming to provide an ecological design hub."

The Thoreau grant is being matched by funds from the Rubenstein School, which has committed to working with departments campuswide, including engineering, community development and applied economics, and plant and soil science.

"That's the advantage" of GreenHouse, said Poleman. "It's not housed within a department—it's Universitywide."

That inclusiveness was appealing to the Thoreau Foundation, which offered the grant by invitation only and had provided funding in 2005 for UVM's Sustainable Forestry Education Initiative. The foundation's goal is to allow undergraduates direct experience in the environmental arena, said Dr. Jennifer Galvin, director of programs and trustee of the Thoreau Foundation, adding that the choice of UVM as grant recipient was unanimous.

"The UVM program is visionary," Galvin said, "providing hundreds of students across a range of academic majors with access to learning about place-based ecological design. It merges academic gusto, practical hands-on experience, and dedicated mentorship."

Poleman is already planning beyond the grant year, which begins August 1.

"The Thoreau grant will be key seed money for a first year," he said, "but we're looking at this as a five-year initiative." The funding will help efforts to galvanize the design community at UVM.

"There's a really dedicated group of students here, and this will give them a home base," Poleman said.

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JENNIFER GALVIN, Thoreau Foundation trustee and program director

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GreenHouse faculty advisor Steve Libby helps students build drying racks.