

Intersections

Volume 2012 | Number 36

Article 6

2012

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Dontje, Jim (2012) "Facing Tornadoes and Climate Change: An Interview with Jim Dontje about Environmental Innovation at Gustavus," *Intersections*: Vol. 2012: No. 36, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2012/iss36/6>

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Facing Tornadoes and Climate Change: An Interview with Jim Dontje about Environmental Innovation at Gustavus

What is the work of the Johnson Center for Environmental Innovation at Gustavus Adolphus?

The Center works in collaboration with students, faculty, and staff across the campus. On the facilities side, it has worked with the Physical Plant director, as well as some key faculty, to bring on-line three large solar thermal systems and several solar electric systems over the past 18 months, as well as support the LEED certification in Beck Hall, our new academic building.

Through student connections, I and others have helped with recycling and energy conservation efforts, consulted on numerous student projects, and been a part of developing a student garden. Over the next few months, we will be adding a food waste composting system and greenhouse to that effort.

I have seen good environmental initiatives come from all across the campus. One of our Campus Safety Officers took it upon himself to create a battery recycling drop-off in our bookstore. When we got NSF funding for a small wind turbine, our physical plant staff “did their homework” and were able to do the installation in a very technically proficient manner.

What is the most challenging issue?

The issue of climate change was, and remains, the top environmental concern. Reducing our greenhouse gas emissions is essential for the success of all our other environmental efforts. I have an ongoing concern that we, as a society, and Gustavus as an institution, have not taken seriously the climate issue. The political partisanship and corporate disinformation campaigns that have led to a public disregard for the issue, the distractions of a severe economic recession, and the administrative changes that we, like every institution, go through on a regular basis, keep distracting our attention from a response to climate change that is proportionate to the danger. This distraction is despite the fact that through our annual Nobel science conference, we have had internationally respected scientists and ethicists state very clearly in front of large audiences on our campus that it is time for strong action. On a more hopeful note, after our most



recent Nobel Conference that focused on oceans, some key faculty and administrators have recognized the need to work together toward a better response.

How is Gustavus positioned or equipped to undertake these initiatives?

The history of Gustavus includes its challenging but successful recovery from being struck by a tornado in 1998. While that was a painful event, and the response taxed the community’s resources to the extreme, the result was a community that knows that once they have come to consensus about what needs to be done, they can do amazing work together. When I am discussing environmental initiatives, if there is consensus about what to do, the conversation moves quite easily to “how can we make it happen.”

Each of our core values, Community, Faith, Justice, Excellence, and Service has an environmental component. We could add a sixth for environmental stewardship, but when we take each one of the existing values seriously, the environmental values rise to the surface naturally.

Our Linnaeus Arboretum gives us space for reflection and a constant reminder of why environmental stewardship and sustainability are important. Besides wildlife, including deer and wild turkey, it draws student researchers pursuing class projects and members of the public wanting to enjoy the space. Because we value the environment in a way that prompts us to set us aside this much area for the arboretum, we are naturally led to think about extending that preservation across campus.

Does the Lutheran identity of Gustavus here matter?

The “Lutheran identity” sometimes leads us to be more cautious, but ultimately our “Lutheranness” is an essential part of our environmental ethos. Lutheran theology and history has always been open to considering environmental issues, witnessed by Luther’s response what we should do if we thought Jesus would return tomorrow (“plant an apple tree”). Our Lutheran identity leads to a willingness to ask what our ethical response should be to our creation.

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