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A balance of power

Project will spread information on alternative energy sources

By ANTONA BECKMAN

Renewable energy. The phrase sounds good, but many Nebraskans may not know much about what it means. People may have seen those two wind turbines north of Lincoln, but what do they do, and whom do they serve? And what other alternative energy sources are available? Would it be possible and efficient to use solar power? And what exactly are the benefits of ethanol?

In an effort to inform Nebraskans about such alternative energy options, the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, along with the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, received a grant of \$12,000 to help Nebraskans learn about and be more familiar with the energy options that exist.

The project, titled Energy and the Future, started in the fall semester of 2007 with researchers from both the journalism college and the policy center. Project plans call for developing a one-hour informational video, a Web site marketing renewable energy and written materials for public distribution.

The \$12,000 grant is funded by the Nebraska Center for Energy Sciences Research, a UNL entity collaborating with the Nebraska Public Power District. The information from the grant will be released to 200 different public entities. In addition, public forums will be held to discuss the information, and the video may be broadcast on NET.

Broadcasting faculty member Jerry Renaud and advertising faculty member Amy Struthers are co-investigators on the project. Both have been leading student involvement, guiding a class of eight students who are extensively researching

alternative energy.

"The goal of this [program] is to give Nebraskans a sense about what their options are when it comes to renewable energy," Struthers said. "We want to get people in Nebraska talking and get them to be active citizens."

With general information as the key message, all parties involved stressed that they will not be choosing sides. The researchers simply want to help



From left, Sarah Jensen, Kurtis Harms and Kristy Bohnet strike a pose outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Nebraskans explore the options available for renewable energy. According to Struthers, information about many alternatives — bio-fuels, solar energy and wind energy — will be included.

This grant is unusual not only because of the partnership between the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and the College of Journalism and Mass Communications but also because students are involved.

"This is the first time I know of that we have worked with the journalism college for a student-driven project," said Tarik Abdel-Monem, the policy center's research specialist. "We are very optimistic and enthusiastic."

Students are conducting interviews

with Nebraska's U.S. senators and representatives to get their views about alternative energy. They also have looked into what the general public is doing to utilize other energy sources, such as home solar panels. The project will span two semesters, bringing new students into the mix in January. The current class consists of eight hand-picked journalism students from the broadcasting or advertising sequences.

Because of the grant, students have been able to travel to neighboring states to record progress in alternative energy use. Students also traveled to Washington, D.C., to interview senators and representatives.

Renaud described the video as something that would resemble a documentary but include more than hard statistics. Not only will the video touch on professional

and government opinions, but it will feature multiple vignettes highlighting individual people who use alternative energy.

"It will be fun to watch," Renaud said. "We're excited about it. It's the first time advertising and broadcasting students are working together like this."

He explained that the broadcasting students will work alongside advertising students, learning more about marketing the information they will provide. On the other side, advertising students will learn more about what it takes to capture and edit video.

Abdel-Monem and

Struthers both expressed their enthusiasm about the final products. They said Nebraskans will become more knowledgeable about their options, and an important issue will receive the attention it deserves. Although the information may not change the behavior of every Nebraskan, it will give people an opportunity to make an informed decision about alternative energy.

According to the policy center, materials are to be finalized and produced in the summer of 2008, before presidential elections in the fall. A key part of this grant is to explore each candidate's views on the issue of alternative energy. Abdel-Monem said the information that surfaces from this project will help the public make an educated vote choice. ■