3-26-2015

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 26, 2015

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Solar Panels Strengthen Academics

CEDARVILLE, OHIO – When Cedarville University began developing its solar array field—the largest connected to any university in Ohio—back in April 2013, the primary purpose was to create new streams of energy on campus. But for Cedarville’s engineering students, the benefits since the installation have become more than just financial.

Tom Thompson, Ph.D., professor of mechanical engineering, started using the solar fields last year to help teach his Topics in Mechanical Engineering class. He focused on analyzing practical applications for solar energy. He also used the field to prompt discussions about the growth of photovoltaic power and the feasibility of using solar energy in the future.

The solar field resource was so beneficial to his students that Thompson wants to use the array again, this time as a kinematics project. The goal is to have students study the arrays in order to develop and design reflectors to improve their efficiency. Because the solar panels are stationary, the reflectors would allow more clean energy to be produced.

“I believe there is a lot of untapped potential with our solar panels,” said Thompson. “We haven’t done much work with them yet, but we’d love to see them used more by our engineering students.”

Robert Chasnov, Ph.D., dean of the school of engineering and computer science, believes students will benefit from using the solar panels in upcoming senior design projects. “It will be great to see students design a solar-powered fan for our engineering projects lab,” said Chasnov.
Apart from these benefits, what was first thought to be a budget-neutral proposition has generated a slight budget gain. And the 2.7 million kilowatt hours of clean energy produced in 2014 helped reduce the university’s energy consumption by 10 percent. Chasnov also mentioned during the summer months, the array provides enough energy to power the entire campus.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 3,620 undergraduate, graduate and online students in more than 100 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings and leading student satisfaction ratings.