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## Northwestern, Botanic Garden Combine Strengths on Plant Biology Degree

EVANSTON, Ill. --- Lauren Umek had been searching for a graduate program in plant biology in the Chicago area when she unexpectedly came across a poster hanging in the environmental science department at DePaul University where she worked.

The poster publicized Northwestern University and the Chicago Botanic Garden's new master's degree program in plant biology and conservation.

"I didn't think there were any graduate programs like that here, so the poster really caught my eye," she explained.

Until recently, Umek was right: there weren't any graduate programs like that in Chicago or anywhere else. In response to a need for plant biologists, Northwestern teamed up with the Chicago Botanic Garden two years ago to offer the nation's first master's degree in plant biology and conservation. The interdisciplinary program is designed to prepare students for leadership positions in fields of botanical science and plant conservation.

Classmate Glen Madeja also heard about the program in a circuitous manner. After spending 25 years in business, he was looking for a career change. His wife saw an article in the Evanston Review and suggested he look into the program.

"As a kid I spent all my time in the forest preserves. My undergraduate degree was from Northwestern in biology and anthropology, and I've been a gardener for the past 20 years," he said. "After researching the program, I thought it was a good fit."

What appealed to both Umek and Madeja, who both enrolled in the fall of 2005, was the chance to study with professors, scientists and researchers from two preeminent institutions.

"It's a fantastic mix," said Umek. "You get the hard science strengths from Northwestern and the applied research strengths from the Chicago Botanic Garden."

"They really did it right as far as I'm concerned," agreed Madeja. "There is the academic prestige from Northwestern University and the hands-on application from the Botanic Garden."

Representatives from the two institutions started talking about developing a master's degree program a few years ago, said Nyree Zerega, director of the Plant Biology and Conservation Program in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences Program in Biological Sciences. Zerega, a lecturer and researcher at the garden, said that one of the impetuses for these discussions was that there wasn't a strong program of this type in the Chicago area. After several discussions, it became obvious that the two organizations should work together to create one.

"The Chicago Botanic Garden, in addition to being a wonderful garden to visit, also has a strong research agenda," Zerega explained. "They have several scientists working on important issues, but the garden itself doesn't have the capacity to grant degrees. Northwestern, on the other hand, didn't have the people on the faculty to offer such a program. So the idea was to pool our resources and make a really strong program with faculty from both institutions."

Currently, the program offers a master of science degree through the Graduate School at Northwestern. Several departments at Northwestern including the biology, anthropology, economics, civil and environmental engineering and earth and planetary sciences departments also support the program.

In order to graduate, students must complete five required courses, including plant systematics, plant community ecology, population genetics and plant conservation genetics, and four electives. Students must also complete three independent research rotations and a master's thesis.

"The independent research components give the students opportunities to work on real world conservation and botanical issues," Zerega said.

Classes are offered at both Northwestern and the Chicago Botanic Garden's newly renovated Joseph Regenstein Jr. Center, which is made up of 130,000 square feet of classrooms, laboratories, courtyards and gardens.

The program is set up to take a student about two years to complete. "But if someone comes in very focused and starts working right away, he or she could finish in 18 months," Zerega said.

The first class of students began in the fall of 2005 and is about to graduate this spring and summer. The second class began this past fall. So far, the program has attracted both recent undergraduates with degrees in science and people like Madeja looking for a second career, Zerega said. Students may enroll on a full-time or a part-time basis.

According to Madeja and Umek, this mix of students is what makes the program so interesting.

"It's been great for us because we all have different strengths and weaknesses and we look at things in really different ways," explained Umek, who majored in environmental science and biology at DePaul before she started working as an urban ecology research coordinator there. "Our conversations are really exciting because of our different

interpretations and experiences.”

After graduating, the students are likely to work for organizations such as botanical gardens, governmental and non-governmental natural resource and conservation organizations, as consultants and in educational institutions, Zerega said. Madeja said he is thinking of working for an organization such as the Nature Conservancy or Chicago Wilderness. Umek said she would like to stay in the Chicago area and do applied research, possibly at DePaul.

So far, Northwestern has kept the program small on purpose, Zerega said. The first class consisted of four full-time students and two part-time students. The second class in fall 2006 is made up of six full-time students and one part-time student. She expects to admit between seven and 10 students a year.

“We want to make sure every student coming in has a good mentoring relationship with his or her advisor,” she explained.

Applications for the program are due Feb. 15 of each year for the following fall. For example, to enroll in the fall 2007, applicants must apply by Feb. 15, 2007.

For more information on the master's program, potential applicants should call (847) 491-4031 or go to the program's web site at <http://www.plantbiology.northwestern.edu/>. Application materials can be found online through the Graduate School's web site at <http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/admission/>.