

Creighton University will soon produce the most solar power in Nebraska, enough juice to keep the electricity humming in three large campus buildings.

The \$2.6 million solar power project, funded mostly by the federal government, will alter the Omaha campus's landscape. By this summer, solar panels will blanket a Creighton parking lot, dot the roof of the campus fitness center and stand next to the school's theater.

The project is also transforming Creighton's curriculum. The private university plans to offer a new major in energy technology and build four new energy-related laboratories.

The goal: Become a national leader in researching the performance, public policy and ethics of alternative energy.

"The goal is that less than 30 percent of the (energy technology) training will be lecture," said Michael Cherney, a physics professor helping to lead the project. "It's very nontraditional, and it's very much in tune with the fact that students learn much, much better by doing things hands-on."

The solar power project, a collaboration between Creighton and the Omaha Public Power District, is expected to produce approximately 110 kilowatts of power on a sunny day, enough energy to power about 30 average houses.

Currently, the vast majority of solar panels in Nebraska are owned by homeowners and produce from 3 to 6 kilowatts of power, according to OPPD research.

Most of the solar power produced at Creighton will be used by the Criss Health Sciences

Building, the Lied Education Center for the Arts and the Kiewit Fitness Center, said Lennis Pederson, the university's director of facilities management.

Four percent of Creighton's total energy needs will soon be generated by solar power and several wind turbines to be installed near the Lied Center, Pederson said.

The U.S. Department of Energy is funding the vast majority of the project after requests from Sen. Ben Nelson and Rep. Lee Terry. A total of \$1.14 million in federal money earmarked for renewable energy promotion is being used to buy and install the solar technology. An additional \$1.2 million in federal funding will be used to get the new Creighton major and energy-related classes up and running, university officials said.

"Our country must become more energy-independent," Terry said. "By using alternative energy technologies, we can make our homes and businesses more efficient."

OPPD is kicking in \$260,000, and in return will be allowed to market the Creighton project to businesses and homeowners thinking about investing in solar power.

The federal and private investment will make a big difference in the education of Omaha area college students, Cherney said.

Metro Community College students will most likely use the solar technology to train for careers as technicians or for other energy-related jobs.

Creighton students who choose the new energy technology major will work closely with the solar project. And students in the sciences, social sciences and humanities will also have new courses to choose from, because Creighton is developing courses in those fields to study the policy, ethics and science surrounding alternative energy, Cherney said.

Even high school students can get involved the project calls for high school juniors interested in

renewable energy to help design the new major. Creighton will soon put out calls seeking input from high school students and the area business community.

"If I was a student, I would think this was really, really exciting," Cherney said.

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