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Ensuring the world's future: David and Patricia Atkinson give Cornell \$80 million gift to bolster sustainability research

ITHACA, N.Y. — Cornell alumnus David R. Atkinson '60 and his wife Patricia Atkinson today (Oct. 28) have given the university an \$80 million gift to turn a three-year-old pilot program that they funded into a permanent, major research center focusing on challenges in the global energy, environmental and economic development arenas. The creation of the David R. Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future constitutes the largest individual gift ever given to a university for sustainability research and faculty support.

"Cornell aspires to be a leader in efforts to create a bright future for our world – for our children, grandchildren and the following generations," said Cornell President David Skorton, who officially announced the gift today during a sustainability symposium.

"David and Pat Atkinson's historic gift provides a permanent base for stimulating and coordinating the university's unfolding capabilities in sustainability."

Said David Atkinson: "The center will be a source of unbiased information, a catalyst bringing knowledge from different disciplines together to address sustainability, and a partner with entrepreneurs, businesses, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and governments to magnify the impact of the knowledge and ingenuity at Cornell in moving society toward a more sustainable future."

Through this center, Cornell has already leveraged the brainpower of 220 faculty fellows from 55 departments. "We connect faculty from a broad variety of disciplines at this very comprehensive university," said Frank DiSalvo, the center's director and a Cornell professor of chemistry.

DiSalvo continued, "With 1,600 faculty in 10 colleges, there are many opportunities to form new teams to tackle important and complex problems. The center provides the means and programs to build new, multidisciplinary collaborations and the external partnerships needed to meet such challenges. Chemists are meeting economists, biologists are meeting sociologists, and so on, and the faculty is coalescing Cornell into a living and learning laboratory for sustainability."

The center demonstrates that when researchers from different disciplines come together, the results can be impressive:

- Cornell engineers and chemists have been working with IBM scientists on innovative solar capture technologies. (Researchers: Sandip Tiwari, engineering; Jiwoong Park, chemistry; and Christopher Ober, materials science.)

- Veterinary, engineering and computer science researchers are collaborating to replace antibiotics with bacteriophages – viruses that infect bacteria – which can be used in the food-animal industry. (Researchers: Rodrigo Carvalho Bicalho, veterinary medicine; Peter Frazier, engineering; and Thorsten Joachims, computer science.)

- Gail Holst-Warhaft, director of the Cornell Institute for European Studies' Mediterranean Initiative, and Tammo Steenhuis, professor of biological and environmental engineering are analyzing the role of government in a growing water crisis regarding water rights and compliance in the Mediterranean Basin and Middle East region.

- Beth Ahner (biological and environmental engineering), Ruth Richardson (civil and environmental engineering) and Maureen Hanson (molecular biology and genetics) are researching how to culture stable microalgae biofuel, in hopes of one day converting algae into biofuel on a large scale.

In addition to DiSalvo, the center has three associate directors: Drew Harvell, associate director for environment, Cornell professor of ecology and evolutionary biology; Jefferson Tester, associate director for energy, the Croll Professor of Sustainable Energy Systems; and Chris Barrett, associate director for economic development, the Stephen B. and Janice G. Ashley Professor in Cornell's Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management.

David and Pat Atkinson are longtime volunteers and benefactors of Cornell. In addition to their support for the newly named Atkinson Center, they have created the Atkinson Forum in American Studies at Cornell and endowed the David R. Atkinson Professorship in Ecology and Environmental Biology. A Presidential Councillor, David Atkinson served on the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Advisory Council from 2003-09 and with Professor Mike Hoffman co-chaired the Environmental Sustainability and Development Task Force, which laid the groundwork for Cornell's current efforts related to sustainability.