MEMORANDUM

Date: 8 December 2010

To: Eric Baack, Dan Bellrichard, Jon Jenson, Rob Larson, Greg Lonning, Greg Vanney, Vicky Jaeger

From: Devin Keenan, Shane Steele, Collin Thompson, Andrew White

Re: Increase Student Use of Trails

Background

Decorah’s collection of over fifteen miles of single-track off-road trails is one of the city’s unique gems. Located throughout the city’s five hundred acres of park land, they draw outdoor recreation enthusiasts—particularly mountain bikers—from around the Upper Midwest. There is also a beautiful newly developed trail system located right on Luther’s campus. Given the easy access to such a wonderful attribute, one would expect to see Luther students on these trails constantly. Unfortunately, this is not the case. It is rare indeed to go on a mountain bike or trail run in any of the parks and see even a single other student. This is not because students lack the desire to be physically fit—everyday, hundreds of students can be seen on the treadmills, ellipticals, and free weights of the Legends Fitness Center. The problem, then, is not that students don’t work out, but that they do it all in the stale confines of a fitness center.

It may seem overly judgmental to call students working out indoors a problem, but in light of the issues associated with what Richard Louv calls “Nature Deficit Disorder,” we think that it is not. While Louv writes mainly of the detrimental effects of not getting children outdoors, it seems that people of all ages could benefit from some quiet time in the woods. Not only could this quiet time help soothe the troubled soul in the increasingly complex and hurried world in which we live, but it could go a long way toward stemming the present environmental crisis. In his *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold famously wrote that “we grieve only for what we know.” Convinced that students will better know and better care for the land once they have gotten into and explored it, it makes sense to encourage them to do so. By getting students into the woods and onto the trails, even if only for a thirty minute jog through Palisades Park, those students may begin to care about what is being lost right now, and hopefully may begin to do something about it. It was with this mission in mind that we developed a Decorah trail guide, a campus trail guide, and a weekly hike program. We also surveyed those working out in Legends to see what other actions could be taken to encourage more trail use.
Decorah Trail Guide

It seems that one of the biggest barriers preventing students from using the Decorah trail system is that they simply don’t know where the trails begin, and if they do know this much, they are too intimidated to go out and explore them. This sentiment is understandable—it is quite easy to get turned around on a first foray into Van Peenen. To help combat this fear of the unknown, we have taken a page out of the National Park Service handbook and created a trail guide. This trail guide provides quick and easy-to-understand descriptions of five routes through the park system. Accompanied by a concise map and information describing their length, difficulty, and scenery, students should have no trouble finding a route that suits their needs. These set routes should help remove some of the anxiety associated with getting out onto the trails. It is our hope that students will eventually branch off of these set routes and start exploring the network of trails on their own. A copy of the Decorah trail guide can be found in Appendix 1.

Campus Trail Guide

As a way to help inquisitive Luther students learn more about Luther’s abundant natural areas we have built a map with five hikes of varying distance and difficulty. Our hope is that this map could be incorporated on the Luther Sustainability website in a way that makes it easy to view and print. This two sided map includes a description of the five routes and a color coded easy to use map. The description is a few words about the highlights of the trail, some details about topography, the distance and what the perceived difficulty is. Each trail will have a color that can be referenced on the map. The purpose for this is to break down the five mile loop into a few smaller hikes that are easier to chew on for some folks. With this map online we hope to reign some of the people daunted by a longer hike but still looking to get off main campus and see what Luther has to offer. A copy of this Campus Trail Guide was turned in separately.

Fitness Survey

As a way to gather information on the main reasons students were not using the available trail system, we conducted an informal survey in Legends Fitness for Life Center on trail usage and recreational habits. The results were not surprising. Generally students stated that they preferred to exercise and be active outdoors, but that they did not use the trails because of lack of knowledge. When asked whether availability of further information and resources on trails and popular routes would increase their trail usage, the general response was that it would. Other influences tended to be type of activity and weather. If students came to Legends for weight training, it was unlikely they would do these activities on the trail system. Another common response was that when it was cold or wet, students preferred to stay indoors as to avoid the unpleasant conditions.
Weekly Hike

In an attempt to expose students to the trails that are available here on Luther’s campus, we have been working in collaboration with Backyard Wilderness Pursuits to organize a daily hike exploring the various trails on campus. Our hope is that various activities such as picnics, art competitions, and faculty guided tours will encourage students to get out and use the trails. Our goal is to expose students to the beautiful trail system available right here on campus, as well as educate them on the history of the landscape and the trails’ origins. We feel that with a consistent and structured weekly hike, student familiarity with the trails will improve and students will begin to develop habits and activities in their own spare time that fully utilize the access to the Luther trail system.

Future Action

Because weather is out of our control and students will continue to focus on lifting in some circumstances, it seems most beneficial to approach this by providing information to students so that they might experience the trails and gain an appreciation for the natural areas themselves.

The trail guides we developed are simple, easy-to-read, and feature routes that would be appropriate and enjoyable for students as they are just beginning their acquaintance with the trail system in Decorah. These should be made readily available in the Adventure Office in the Union, as well as in other locations around campus, such as the Welcome Desk and Legends. This information could potentially be included in orientation materials for new students or in information packets for prospective students, as the recreational opportunities are defining characteristics for this area and Luther College.

We hope that by mapping out the various trails available for use on Luther Campus and posting descriptions of the trails online that we will be taking a step towards increasing the regularity of student use of the trails, as well as encouraging new students to get out and experience the trails. Our weekly hike program will also help with this goal by showing the wide variety of activities that can be enjoyed on the trail to attract students that may not be interested in a bike, hike, or run. We will attempt to aim the weekly hike to appeal to students with many different interests and attempt to broaden the extra-curricular activities associated with the trails.

Ideally, we would like to see the relationship with both Luther’s and Decorah’s trail system developed early in students’ careers so that they might continue to support and use these trails throughout their time at Luther and beyond. This could be done through the First-Year Immersion program by featuring the Decorah trail system with a week of hiking, mountain biking, camping, or any of the other activities this area has to offer. The most important step would be to give students an appreciation of the recreational trails, which would result in increased usage and support for such a fantastic resource.
Appendix 1

RIVER TRAIL OUT-AND-BACK

STATS: 2 miles out-and-back, 1 mile one-way, Easy

DESCRIPTION: A wooded trail following the North bank of the Upper Iowa River as it flows past the city of Decorah, this wide route is perfect for hikers and trail runners travelling with a small group and also for beginning mountain bikers.

DIRECTIONS: Start at the small gravel lot at the intersection of Ice Cave Road and the road to Dunning’s Spring. You will see a big brown trail sign on the east edge of the lot with a dirt trail heading into the woods. Follow this trail along the riverside, staying right at all intersections. You will eventually pass under the 5th street bridge and cross a small stream. From here the trail heads up to another small gravel lot. Turn around here to complete the out-and-back, or connect to the Palisades or Death Valley entrances for a longer route.

TWIN SPRINGS LOOP

STATS: 5 miles, Easy (paved portion) to Moderate (single track portion)

DESCRIPTION: Both starting and ending on Luther’s campus, this loop route covers both paved bike trail and dirt single-track trail, making it great for those wishing to get a taste of trail running or hiking. As much of it follows the Upper Iowa River, it is an ideal way to get to know Decorah’s stunning scenery.
DIRECTIONS: Start on campus at Norby House and head south on Riverview Dr. until it comes to 5th Ave. Cross the street and follow the bike path that crosses the bridge. Continue on this path as it passes through the Decorah City Campground. Upon exiting the campground, you will come to Oneota Dr. where you should take a right to enter Twin Springs park. Look for a wooden bridge that crosses a small stream on your left, cross it and look for another bridge on your right. After crossing the two bridges you will follow the stream uphill past the old fish hatchery until you come to its source: the Twin Springs. Behind the springs you will find the beginnings of another dirt trail. It quickly comes to a fork, and you can take either way as it is a loop. When you return to this fork, retrace your footsteps back to the campground. Instead of re-entering the campground, follow Oneota drive as it crosses the bridge over Dry Run and eventually narrows back down to a bike path. Follow the path until it opens back up into a small parking lot. From here, you can follow the top of the levee to the College Dr. Bridge. Take a left and follow College Dr. to return to campus.

PASSING THROUGH PALISADES

STATS: 2 miles, Moderate to Strenuous

DESCRIPTION: A great loop for hiking and biking, this route covers a few different trails through Palisades Park. It starts at river level and climbs to give beautiful views of Decorah and the river valley.

DIRECTIONS: Begin on Ice Cave Road at the entrance to Palisades Park. Continue down the gravel road until you find an entrance to “Dead Pet” trail on the left. You will cross a small paved intersection once and the main road through Palisades twice. Once on top of the hill, there is an optional loop called Log Jam that breaks from this trail to the right that ends on the same trail. You will cross the road again to get onto “Lee’s Loop.” This will continue until you make your final road crossing onto “Smeby’s” trail, which climbs for a very short while before making a very steep descent. There is another loop that is optional off the right side of the trail on a hairpin turn. “Smeby’s” trail will take you down through the backyard of the wonderful Smeby family and bring you back to Ice Cave road, very near where you began.
THE MANY FACES OF VAN PEENEN

STATS: Moderate to Strenuous

DESCRIPTION: A wonderful route if you are looking for a bit of all terrains: dense forest, prairie, pine stands, steep, winding, technical, flowy...you get the idea.

DIRECTIONS: Start at the Death Valley trailhead, across Quarry Hill Road from the Bruening Garage. Stay right on the trail marked “The Luge.” Upon entering a clearing called “Death Valley,” You will find the “Rocky Road” after the trail curves to the right. After a couple of stream crossings and a long climb, there will be a small, steep entrance to a trail on the right, ignore this but take the next right, called “First Right”. Follow this until you reach the entrance to “Pines East”, a beautiful, winding trail through a pine grove. Upon reaching a fork in the trail, take the left option, which will bring you out of the pines. Continue on this trail until you see the entrance for “Little Bighorn” on the right. Follow this trail to the right, as there is a split almost immediately upon entering. This is a great loop that will wind for quite a while through beautiful forest on really well established trails. Eventually you will come to a hairpin curve with a metal plate holding together a stump that you must step over; right after this, take the right that leads down the hill back onto “Rocky Road.” Be careful, this turn is less defined, but shouldn’t be a problem if you are looking for it. Turn right on “Rocky Road” and left on “Fred” trail, working your way back down into “Death Valley.” Follow “The Luge” back out of the woods and back to where you began.

DUNNING’S FOR DUMMIES

STATS: Moderate to Strenuous

DESCRIPTION: A somewhat challenging loop that will bring you along the ridge above Ice Cave Road and drop you at one of Decorah’s most scenic spots.

DIRECTIONS: Begin on Ice Cave Road, passing Dunning’s Spring entrance. You will see the entrance to “River Trail” on your right; continue along the road until you reach the entrance to
“Boa” on the left. After climbing along the hillside you will reach a steep uphill turn that will bring you to a T-intersection on the trail. Turn left and follow this trail as it winds along the top of the bluff. There will be another intersection, but this one not as defined. Continue to the left, which is part of “Upper Ice Cave Trail,” and when the trail splits another time, stay to the right, on the uphill option. This will continue down a small rocky slope and loop around through a narrow channel with tall trees on each side. At the end of this stand of trees there is a little open meadow where the trail loops back around up the hill slightly. Upon reaching this meadow, you will see a sign to the right saying “No Bikes.” Take this trail (unless you are on a bike, in which case, continue to the left and follow “Wold’s Peak” trail out of the woods). This will lead you to a couple great views of the valley before make a steep rocky descent to Dunning’s Spring. After enjoying the spring, take the road back out where it connects with Ice Cave Road.