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For Immediate Release
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Two educators and a policy expert who helped organize an educational program focused on culture, commerce, and conservation for top-ranked Chinese high school students have been named 2012 Wisconsin Collaborative Leaders of the Year by a state leadership group.

The three selected by the Wisconsin Leadership Institute (WLI) are: Jeff Smoller, deputy operations manager at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; Jack Palmer, liaison for the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University; and Dr. Mike Richie, Superintendent of Northland Pines School District in Eagle River.

The three helped conceive and manage a multi-week program, known as Rivers as Bridges, which brought two dozen of China's most promising 15- and 16-year-old students to communities in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Along the way, the students learned about natural resources, while also focusing on values of leadership and collaboration. Students and their families paid for the trip, along with some in-kind donations.

Besides visiting many public and private colleges, the students took part in picnics, dancing, drama lessons, and Native American pow-wows. They also did hands-on research in laboratories, high-tech businesses, waterways and natural resource areas. Ultimately they prepared and presented academic posters that captured the lessons they learned about culture, endangered species, water resources and more.

One highlight of the trip was a stop at a home in Muscatine, Iowa, where Chinese vice president Xi Jinping visited earlier this year where he declared to Muscatine residents that "to me, you are America." He encouraged people-to-people visits, like that of the Rivers as Bridges. Jinping stayed in Muscatine as a provincial agriculture official in 1985.

"This is the beginning of a 10-year project," said Palmer, who served as curriculum director for the program sponsored primarily by the Environmental and Public Health Network for Chinese Students and Scholars. "Our goal is to develop this into a full education program for both students in China and the United States."

The students received certificates from Northland Pines School District, which could qualify them for high school credit depending on where and how they wanted to use it. That portion of the program was organized by Richie, who also was recently named Superintendent of the Year by the National Association of School Superintendents.

The certificates were also signed by DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp, who was the graduation speaker for the program. Her involvement was arranged by Smoller, who was assigned by the DNR to facilitate the program with another sponsor, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

The awards were presented Dec. 7, 2012 in Ripon by the Collaborative Leadership Network, part of the WLI, which was created in 1996 by then-Gov. Tommy Thompson's Commission on the Study of Administrative Value and Efficiency (SAVE) to promote leadership training and values. Previous winners include Thompson, Laurie Frank of Madison, Carol Ruth Carlin of Lake Geneva, Carla Hacker of Madison and Frank Cumberbatch of Ripon.

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