A comprehensive antidote to a challenging global oil picture

May 8 2012, by Kurt Pfitzer

In a changing, often unpredictable world, says Karen Timmerman, only a balanced and comprehensive plan can improve United States energy policy.

While developing renewable energy sources and energy-generating technologies, says Timmerman, the U.S. must also maximize efforts to increase domestic shale-oil production.

And while attempting to manage the global hotspots that threaten to disrupt oil supplies, the U.S. should push for greater transparency in the operations of multinational and state-owned oil companies.

Timmerman, a senior international relations major, makes her case in a paper titled "The Strategic Picture of Oil and U.S. Energy Policy Recommendations for the Next Decade."

The manuscript received the 2012 Libraries Student Research Prize, which is given annually by Library and Technology Services (LTS) and the Friends of the Lehigh University Libraries.

The prize, which carries a $1,000 award, recognizes "excellence in undergraduate scholarship and the use of library and research resources." Timmerman was one of more than 45 students to enter the competition. Her paper will become part of the Lehigh libraries digital archive.

"Karen writes with clarity and authority that show potential for future

scholarship and research," said Stacey Kimmel-Smith, LTS team leader and part of the panel of librarians and faculty members who interviewed the contest finalists.

Will increases in supply offset rising demand?

Timmerman originally wrote her paper for IR 344: "The International Politics of Oil," a class taught by Henri Barkey, professor of international relations. She used the Web of Scientific Citations and the database Lexis-Nexis to locate relevant journal articles, policy briefs and government and international agency reports.

The global strategic picture for oil, she predicts, will change greatly over the next decade, as demand increases from Indonesia, Brazil, China, India and other growing nations.

This could be offset by increases in supply—if Canada taps its tar-sands and the U.S. its shale-oil deposits, if Iraq boosts production, if Venezuela controls corruption and if Nigeria calms its religious tensions. The development of alternative sources could also reduce demand for oil, albeit slightly, while alleviating the environmental impact of petroleum production.

One recommendation Timmerman makes could affect more than energy policy.

"Agriculture is a significant consumer of oil in the U.S.," she says. "If we move from agri-business to local farming, that would reduce the cost of shipping food long distances. And if we move to organic farming, that would reduce the need for pesticides and herbicides, which require petroleum.

"This would also promote better health. Some studies show that the

incidence of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases is higher in areas where people are exposed to pesticides and other toxic materials."

Timmerman's other writing awards include third place for Lehigh's Williams Prize for writing in history, international relations or political science and second place in the Lehigh Review for an article on the "resource curse," which refers to countries that mismanage abundant natural resources.

Timmerman plans to pursue a graduate degree in international relations and possibly an MBA.

"Economics and finance," she says, "are integral to understanding international relations."

Provided by Lehigh University