Winds of Change

College Looks to Replace Two Top Administrators

The atmosphere of change sweeping the nation in recent months has not bypassed the College of Agricultural Sciences, which is planning for a leadership transition of its own.

Robert Steele, dean of the college, has announced that he will step down effective July 1 after twelve years in the job. Steele, who has served longer than all but two deans in the college's history, will join the faculty as a tenured professor in the Department of Food Science.

Steele expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to lead the college—the first academic college established at Penn State—in its land-grant mission. "During my time as dean, the Commonwealth and the nation have faced unprecedented challenges, from threats to the safety and security of our food supply and communities to the need for clean, renewable energy," Steele says. "As I prepare to step down this summer, I am confident that the next dean will take the helm of a college that is well positioned to provide the scientific knowledge, practical know-how, and highly prepared graduates to help address such societal issues."

Steele has presided over a period of transformation and targeted growth in the college, notes Penn State President Graham Spanier. "Under Bob Steele's watch, we've been able to maintain and strategically strengthen Penn State's historic commitment to serve the state's agricultural industry and citizens with cutting-edge research and locally relevant cooperative extension programs—despite funding levels that have not kept pace with needs," says Spanier. "At the same time, the college has made great strides in a renewed effort to attract the highest caliber of students to the agricultural sciences."

Dean Robert Steele

Rodney Erickson, executive vice president and provost and the officer to whom deans report, says the University will be hard pressed to replace Steele's leadership. "Bob Steele has been a truly visionary dean who recruited and retained outstanding faculty, whom he inspired and supported in achieving great success for the College of Agricultural Sciences," he says.

Among Steele's most significant accomplishments as dean, according to Erickson:

• Major new additions to the college's physical plant, including the new Food Science and Forest Resources buildings. Containing state-of-the-art laboratory and teaching facilities, the new buildings are credited with helping attract top-notch faculty and students to the college while supporting industries important to Pennsylvania's economy.

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• Implementation of new marketing and recruitment strategies that have helped lead to recent increases in undergraduate enrollment, reversing a trend of declining enrollments also experienced by colleges of agriculture across the country.

• Steady growth in the research funds the college attracts. In fiscal year 2007, the college's research budget totaled $82 million, representing a more than 50 percent growth in research expenditures since the mid-1990s.

• Major new research initiatives in chemical ecology, reproductive biology, and infectious disease and immunology, which have attracted internationally renowned scientists to the college and enhanced graduate education.

• A renewed focus on environmental and energy issues, including the college's establishment of the Environment and Natural Resources Institute, the Biomass Energy Center, and the Agriculture and Environment Science and Policy Center.

• Significant progress in the planning, development, and fund-raising for The Arboretum at Penn State, culminating in the official groundbreaking ceremony in November 2007. The Arboretum had been proposed for the better part of a century, but little progress had been made until recently, with the college playing a leading role in getting the project off the ground.

A native of western Pennsylvania, Steele received his bachelor's degree in nutritional sciences and his master's in biochemistry and nutrition from the University of Arizona in 1970 and 1973, respectively, and his doctorate in nutritional sciences from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1978.

Steele came to Penn State from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he was associate dean for research in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and executive director of the Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station. He began his career at Rutgers University in 1978, then returned to the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1982 and rose through the academic ranks to professor, conducting research and teaching in biochemical and physiological aspects of nutritional sciences. "I am especially looking forward to returning to the classroom and becoming involved in undergraduate and graduate student advising," Steele says.

Meanwhile, the college also is reviewing candidates to replace one of Steele's closest colleagues, Paul Wangsness, who retired as se-

nior associate dean in 2008 after a thirty-seven-year Penn State career. "Working with Bob Steele has been a great experience," says Wangsness, who assumed his most recent post six months before Steele became dean. "We've been able to accomplish much to move the college forward."

Wangsness is uniquely qualified to assess a dean's effectiveness. He worked with five deans, four interim deans, fifty-five academic unit leaders, and countless Penn State Cooperative Extension administrators and educators during stints as a professor of animal nutrition, head of the Department of Dairy and Animal Science, regional director for extension's Capital Region, associate dean for graduate studies and animal sciences, and senior associate dean.

He cites additions and enhancements to the college's physical plant, technological advances, an emphasis on cross-department and intercollege collaborative research and educational programming, and a growing ability to attract funding beyond state and federal appropriations as some of the most significant changes he's seen. The scope and variety of his roles has made for a fascinating and rewarding career, he says.

"Through it all, the common denominator for me was to bring a faculty member's perspective to my work and to keep in mind that our core mission is to serve and prepare our students," says Wangsness. He and his wife, Sally, former director of Penn State's School of Nursing, have demonstrated that concern by committing $100,000 to endow two scholarships to benefit students in the college who have financial need.

Despite intense competition for shrinking resources, Wangsness sees a bright future for the College of Agricultural Sciences. "Good ideas—with smart people working on them—will attract funding and support," he notes. "And this college has a lot of smart people with good ideas."

—Chuck Gill

The Green Side of School Spirit

For many alumni, school spirit means cheering on a winning football team and cherishing warm memories of carefree college days. However, alumnus John Finegan is pioneering a different style of collegiate loyalty that could help lead to solutions for the nation's energy challenges.

As a 1979 Horticulture graduate, Finegan has remained involved with the College of Agricultural Sciences for almost thirty years. Now living in California, he and his wife, Mary, in 1997 funded the Ray Finegan Agricultural Leadership Endowment for outstanding undergraduates in Agricultural and Extension Education in remembrance of his father. The couple also provided early seed money for The Arboretum at Penn State. In his role as a board member of the private Morgan Family Foundation—an organization founded by his wife's parents—Finegan discovered the innovative programs of Penn State's Biomass Energy Center. It was, he says, a natural match for everyone involved.

"Our foundation has a strong focus on the environment, and the center's biomass research fits with both the foundation's goals and my personal interests," he says. "My background and professional career is in agriculture. This research was a perfect candidate for our support considering those factors."

As chief executive officer of Beck Ag of Omaha, Nebraska, which trains farmers, ag retailers, ranchers, veterinarians, golf course superintendents, and others to use Web 2.0-based word-of-mouth marketing solutions, Finegan was comfortable with cutting-edge technologies and was convinced of the center's potential. As a result, the Morgan Family Foundation has committed $270,000 over the next two years to fund research at the center, which has as its mission "to coordinate and facilitate bioenergy research and outreach across the university, building teams to address the complete value chain of biomass energy systems." This commitment follows a $150,000 gift in 2007, and additional gifts are planned.

The foundation's philanthropy will fund a collaborative project involving Penn State, Dartmouth College, Iowa State University, and Sustainable Conservation, an environmental stewardship organization. Finegan explains that center director Tom Richard, who also directs the Penn State Institutes of Energy and the Environment, was instrumental in securing the foundation's support.

"I'd like to see Penn State continue to lead in developing bioenergy," he says. "Tom Richard's collaborative nature and leadership in this area made a very compelling case to support this important research."

Richard says the center's affiliate researchers are examining the problems associated with the rising national demand for biofuels. Scientists are exploring innovative cropping systems that can produce both food and renewable energy feedstocks in a way that is environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable.

The team will attempt the novel and proactive approach of using a site-specific farm simulation and decision tool to develop sustainable regional cropping systems, which could include such methods as planting bioenergy cover crops and alternating annual and perennial crops in rotations that increase productivity while enhancing soil and water quality.

Richard says the foundation's support allows the center to nurture promising, new research that might not be quite ready for submission to competitive grant programs, which rely heavily on preliminary research findings—which require funding to generate.

"It's a chicken-and-egg problem, so this is how we hatch the 'chickens' to lay the 'eggs' and get important new research started," he says. "The foundation's gift helps us look at the sustainability questions associated with biomass crop production. For instance, we can look at ways of integrating energy and food crops so that we're producing food and fuel, rather than food versus fuel. We can investigate ways of incorporating perennial grasses along steep hills and stream banks so that biomass production also contributes to soil conservation and water protection. We can develop bioenergy crops as winter cover crops, so that land that once stood fallow during the winter is actually being productive between summer annual crops."

Ultimately, Richard says, the new decision tools, analytical techniques, and production practices that spring from Biomass Energy Center research will help farmers understand how energy crops can generate income and good environmental outcomes. And he says the foundation's funding already is generating the long-range support necessary to get promising technologies to the farmers and entrepreneurs who will turn them into profitable industries.

"We've already had a number of inquiries from federal and state agencies that want to support this work once it gets to a practical stage," he says. "And we've already seen examples of follow-on support from external funding agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Energy, that focus on biomass feedstocks and the logistics of energy-crop storage."

Finegan says he's thrilled with the opportunity to advance research in the bioenergy field. "I can envision that the collaborations Dr. Richard is blazing with other universities and groups will eventually lead to entrepreneurial companies that can take the new technologies and concepts this research generates and develop them commercially," he says.

—Gary Abdullah