

Incoming NACTA President's Message



**Mike Mullen, University of Kentucky,
NACTA President 2009-2010.**



It is indeed an honor to be with you here tonight. NACTA means a great deal to me and to be named president for the next year is a responsibility I gladly accept.

When I first contemplated this presentation, I thought perhaps I would do a few magic

tricks, but, I did not want to embarrass Keith Karnok who demonstrated his magician skills a few years ago. I also thought about a running string of one-liners, but, I did not want you all to have too much fun listening to my jokes... So, instead of entertaining you on a grand scale, I will stick to a few directed comments and finish up in short order.

First, let me thank the entire Oklahoma State University team for this outstanding week. You have provided us with an outstanding meeting and we are grateful to you for your hard work and dedication on behalf of the entire NACTA organization.

I began my college teaching journey in 1982 while a graduate student at Purdue. I had the honor of working with some of the best teachers I have ever known, including Jim Alrichs, Bill McFee and George van Scoyoc. They planted in me the seeds of a teaching career that later had the chance to grow when I landed that first faculty job at the University of Tennessee. I taught all manner of soils courses, from sophomore to PhD for the next decade, and found kindred spirits among the instructors who participated in the Resident Education section of the American Society of Agronomy. But, even at those meetings, the focus was primarily on our disciplinary science, and only a small percentage of our membership participated in those sessions. But, I did get to meet and interact with other great teachers there, like Jim McKenna, Wayne Banwart, Kevin Donnelly, Jeff Hattey and Larry Grabau, among others. And then, in 1999, I joined NACTA and attended my first meeting at Virginia Tech. After over 15 years of teaching, I found at that meeting what I had been missing in other professional venues: a community of dedicated professionals with a desire to improve teaching and learning, regardless of their discipline. With only one exception, I have attended every meeting since, and I continue to reap great benefit from being here and interacting with all of you. NACTA is the one venue that brings together like-minded professionals to discuss that which has always been of prime importance for me – the teach-

ing and learning that takes place in our colleges and universities.

And, let me assure you, what we do, what we all have a passion for, teaching and learning, is more important than ever. Education as we have known it is changing. We know that our students are different than when we were in school, not worse, but different. Many learn differently, expect more from us, and have perhaps more pragmatic goals for their education, like getting a high paying job right out of school. As we have discussed here this week, society expects more from us in the way of accountability. Our accrediting agencies expect assessment of student learning, to show that students leave our institutions with the ability to apply their education. And, the world is changing in ways that require us, institutions of agriculture, human and natural resource sciences, to rethink not only how we teach, but what we teach.

It is significant that this meeting marks the second year in which the USDA Science and Education Resources Development group, the recipients of Higher Education Challenge grants, are meeting with NACTA. It is also significant that the academic deans of landgrant universities in the southern and north-central regions decided to sponsor this NACTA conference in lieu of developing separate workshops that often have taken place at about the same time as the NACTA conferences. These collaborations speak to the reality that we are stronger as a community of educators together than if we are meeting in smaller, perhaps isolated venues. I also believe these collaborations are important because of the changes mentioned before. The National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences sponsored a three day conference in 2006 on Transforming Agricultural Education for a Changing World. A prepublication of the report is available from NRC online (http://dels.nas.edu/ag_education/), and I have a copy here. We do not have time tonight to really discuss this report, but, it did produce a number of recommendations for our colleges to consider for us to change our programs to more effectively support a flexible, well-prepared workforce for the needs of the 21st century.

The Academy recommends that we do some strategic introspection, to evaluate what we do and develop modern curriculum that meets the needs of tomorrow, not yesterday. The academy recommends that faculty be prepared to teach effectively. There is a recognition that faculty are not usually trained in educational methods, even as we recognize the need for more methods of teaching in our classrooms. We must do better at engaging our students to affect deep

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learning. The Academy implores that we find ways to reward exemplary teaching, calling for real recognition and reward for high quality teaching, advising and curriculum development and that these become fully a part of the promotion and tenure process. And the Academy encourages us to build strong collaborations among institutions, between our four year colleges, and with community and tribal colleges. Clearly this recommendation is important to most of you here tonight. I would argue that NACTA embodies these recommendations already, we know that we must evolve our education programs to remain relevant, that we must be involved in professional development to improve our teaching, that what we do is vitally important and must be recognized as such at all our institutions, and, what better way to build collaborations among institutions than to come together at NACTA.

You have also heard this week that the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service will become the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and that there is a renewed emphasis on education in grant programs. To that effect, the academic deans that meet with the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities – formerly NASULGC – have followed the Academy report with our own set of recommendations to prepare students for global leadership in agriculture and related sciences – a road map for how we can interact with NIFA to pursue new avenues to improve the education of our students for a rapidly changing world.

Given these activities, it is indeed of great importance that we have here in Stillwater this week the SERD grant recipients to enrich our meeting with their educational work and to learn from the broader NACTA membership. And the sponsorship of this NACTA Conference by the Academic Deans of the Southern and North-Central regions also points to possibilities for greater collaborations with other teaching faculty who may not have discovered us yet.

What does all of this mean? I want to simply close with a challenge to you, the membership of NACTA. We are poised in a wonderful place to take advantage of changes in agricultural, human, and natural science education. We can and will make a difference in the education process as we prepare students for the 21st century workforce. Take what you have learned this week back to your campuses. Talk with your colleagues about your curriculum – is it relevant, does it address the needs of today's society? Think about what your students look like when they graduate – what can they do? How will you know? Discuss with your colleagues what it looks like to evaluate what we do in the classroom. How do we make our teaching more of a public process, ready for continuous improvement? NACTA is a great place to start to answer these questions.

Again, it is an honor for me to have been elected as President of NACTA. I look forward to serving this wonderful society for the next year, culminating with our meeting at Penn State University next June!

