Forestry At Iowa State Our Second Century

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It was in 1874 that Suel Foster, an Iowa nurseryman and an ardent believer in the concept of an agricultural college, encouraged the initiation of coursework in horticulture and forestry. Thus our beginnings considerably predate the Biltmore school of Dr. Schenck and the earliest concepts and admonitions of Gifford Pinchot. So impressive a heritage and so long a history should not be taken lightly by any of us now in residence for we have been preceded by others whose contributions were greater than ours, and we will be followed by yet others who may surpass all that has gone before.

Although the accepted date of origin of a formal curriculum in Forestry is 1904, the development of continuity of direction dates to the arrival of Gilmour MacDonald ("Prof. Mac" to hundreds of foresters) in 1910.

From that date to 1950, the character of our department was firmly established by the boundless energy of that one man and the faculty that he gathered. This period coincided with the heyday of the conservation movement in America. Forestry was the antithesis of exploitive logging and thus the protection of forests from fire in the cutover areas was a massive and highly visible task which was universally applauded. Foresters and "Ames Foresters" in particular, were expected to be competent in everything from throwing a diamond hitch to running a CCC camp to regulating a forest by the French methode du controle. All students were expected to go to Forestry Camp which might be a railroad trip to the West Coast or a walking trip through Glacier National Park. Help in job locating was a task single-handedly undertaken by Professor MacDonald because he believed that Iowans must spread out through the whole United States to avoid the isolation of this prairie university and to prevent insular smugness.
During this period the Department Head was also State Forester and was simultaneously, during the 30’s, director of the CCC program. While teaching any courses that were left over, Prof. Mac would keep up correspondence with all of his “Ames Foresters” and in June would head out of town, picking up a cook and a cook-stove on his way and personally direct the summer camp for the year. An ardent believer in setting aside park lands, Professor MacDonald worked effectively with those early Iowa conservationists, MacBride and Pammel, in building up the park system in the state. Although the paperwork proliferation had not yet come to university administrators, his task was not an easy one. Enrollment in the late 30’s was higher than it has been until 1975, the returning veterans of World War II provided a population explosion from 1945 to 1950 that outdistanced faculty replacement. The forestry faculty had been reduced to one man during the war years. A further complication arose from a group in Iowa which tried to eliminate forestry education from the university. This latter event was defanged by the combined efforts of a devoted alumni and by cartoonist-conservationist Ding Darling of the Des Moines Register.

No modern forestry school administrator can feel uniquely overworked after observing G. B. MacDonald in action.

During the ten subsequent years, from 1950-1960, our department became increasingly effective in cooperative matters within Iowa and provided increasing emphasis on industrial forestry due to the tireless efforts of George Hartman. His warm and understanding manner, his devotion to students, his enthusiasm for industry, and his knowledge of and love for Iowa put an indelible stamp on Iowa Staters over the twenty years that he taught and administered here. Dedicated to good teaching and warm friendliness through formal advising and informal rapport, Professor Hartman continued the pattern of teaching, advising, and service that welded together one of the strongest alumni groups in the nation.

In 1960, the profession of forestry was changing under the influx of great numbers of young and highly educated professionals who were stimulated by research, encouraged by more readily available funds and experienced in the ways of bureaucracy. Carl Stoltenberg from the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, U.S. Forest Service, by way of California, was the third Head of Department. An economist by training and a natural leader, he initiated the doctorate program in Forestry and made research and publication the key to success for his faculty.

In 1967, the bloom was beginning to fade from the flowering of budgetary abundance that had allowed for the expansion of faculty and the building of the just-completed Bessey Hall. H. H. Webster, another economist from the Northeastern Station, had cut his teeth as an administrator at the University of Wisconsin and became our fourth Head. An avid spectator of the political arena, he brought to Iowa State still another perspective, awareness of the legislative process, and another talent, the know-how of administrative organization. While only moderately enthused about Iowa as an outlet for his energies, “Hank” Webster believed passionately in cooperation with other forest schools and agencies. His ability to fuse together complex amalgamations of people and funds was unprecedented, and his interest in removing boundaries between organizations was watched by some with awe and by some with suspicion. His concern for minorities and his support for opportunities for women fit well to the turbulent sixties and accomplished much in increasing the awareness of the times in the minds of students and faculty.

But departments change through the efforts of others besides administrators. Humaneness and literacy were exemplified by Dr. J. A. (Skipper) Larsen; the quantitative skills were enlarged by Dwight Demerritt, Allan Goodspeed and Kenneth Ware; the scientific method and biologic talents by A. L. McComb and Gordon Gatherum; the emphasis on extension was developed by Guy Ramsey and Richard Campbell; the concern for forest recreation and esthetics was first shown by G. B. MacDonald and formalized by DeWitt “Swede” Nelson; the concern for wood products by George Hartman as a teacher and carried on and developed by Dwight Bensend (who has to be listed despite my intention to exclude people currently on the faculty). Each current faculty member has expanded these skills and built on the foundations of those who have gone before.

Today the cultivation of an environment for learning is no less important than the protection and wise use of the natural environment for which we are perhaps more obviously responsible. It is the protection and improvement of this learning environment that has undoubtedly impressed each man who has assumed leadership for the Department of Forestry. Further, it is this feeling of responsibility that prompts an administrator to draw to himself the strengths of his colleagues on his faculty and in the profession at large. But a point sometimes overlooked in the “we-them” atmosphere that sixteen years of schooling seems to generate where university students gather is this: No university can be better in its students and that must surely mean that the cutting edge of our profession in the future is forged by the energy and dedication of those professionals-in-embryo—today’s forestry students.
To clarify the atmosphere and remove misunderstanding, let me repeat for the nth time that the etymology of the term “forestry” is this—timber, recreation, wood products, range, esthetics, water, wildlife habitat are all encompassed. Goal defining, the black box of “doing” and the cybernetics of feedback are common to everything that we attempt to do. Further, biology, economics and sociology are equally versatile hand-maidsens in the massive household in which our mutual career choices have placed us. The least wise among us soon come to the realization that the ignoring of any part of our responsibility or the abandonment of any one of our tools will lead us to grief.

What is it that we attempt to do with the taxpayer’s money and the students’ tuition in this societal institution called the Department of Forestry? The question bears some serious thinking. Nowhere in our charter are we enjoined to provide a cloister for adults with first charge is to serve society by combining finances, environmental management and natural resource energies of those who come here. It is most fortunate that such an objective makes it possible for young people to earn a living while at the same time making it possible to extend the frontiers of knowledge of environmental management and natural resource use.

The conventional approach of such a department as ours, as we serve the public, is to partition the task into three categories: classroom education, extension or off-campus education, and research. While the particular interests and efforts of faculty members tend to be focused on one or two of these categories to the apparent exclusion of the others, it is evident that the responsibility of the institution is to all. There are few forestry schools that can prosper for long if any one of the three areas of responsibility is very long ignored.

The serving of our various publics is complicated not only by the apparently endless conflicts always engendered when one seeks to serve multiple masters, but also by the vast numbers of young people who have interest in the out-of-doors and conservation fields. If one excludes the seasonal hoop-la that concentrates on athletic fame and then passes over the mythology of elitism that surrounds certain universities, the next most obvious characteristic of schools would certainly be the numbers of students (usually undergraduates) enrolled. Tax-paying parents and legislators have strong opinions about admission standards, subject matter offerings, cost per student, efficiency of classroom use and a host of items that faculty members sometimes think of cynically as “head count”.

The challenge to all of us who feel responsible for the Department of Forestry is that of providing an education to an apparently infinite number of students with a finite resource of funds, personnel and time. Limiting of enrollment might very well solve many of the truly puzzling questions about providing a quality education but when the question is reduced to “Will I (or my son or daughter) be excluded from studying Forestry at Iowa State University?” the matter ceases to be purely rhetorical and becomes more personal. This is much the same as the stance I take on the limitation of family size to a replacement basis. I approve of it in a philosophical way, but pragmatically I oppose it for I have a perfectly good third son who would not have been born (and, as a matter of fact, neither would I—or my father—or his father).

It is easy to see that the result of offering an educational chance to each one who asks for it is this: Classes will be bigger than desirable for those students who should have special attention, i.e., those who have special talents or special problems at either end of the Gaussian distribution. There will be more graduates than there will be jobs, for our resource is finite, too. There will be continual competition among students for favored courses, favored times and favored teachers. More and more impersonal will become the educational process and more and more numerous will become the complaints of the unlucky who, like children in a large family, can’t sit next to the window in the car or next to grandpa at Christmas. Greater and greater will be the inclination for the teacher-scientist to withdraw to the laboratory to flee the distractions of advising and the cries of dissent from increasingly distraught or disinterested students. Less and less may become the emphasis on providing service to the off-campus residents of the state:

Unless—
And this is the important part.

Unless—students begin to participate in the dialogue of the classroom where each contributes by raising questions, volunteering information from readings and personal insight and thereby draws attention to his own interest and thus personalizes the classroom experience.
—grade getting is put in its proper place and an eagerness to learn replaces the all-too-common emphasis on getting the diploma and getting out.
—the expectation of entertainment from the teacher is replaced by the humbling awareness that teaching and communication require receivers as well as senders and that late-night-talk-show comics are extremely scarce even on television and are never found in classrooms.
—faculty members become convinced that there is both satisfaction and success in good classroom teaching.
—administration at all levels goes to bat day in and day out for the classroom contributions of its staff members.

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