

## PLANT AND SOIL SCIENCES

### DEPARTMENTAL UPDATE

Peter Veneman

Welcome back from a well deserved vacation. Hope this message finds everyone healthy and ready to start the new academic year. As many of you have noticed and experienced, virtually every part of the campus has been touched by construction activities. Everything was supposed to have been finished by September, except that the powers to be didn't specify which September they were talking about. It looks like a mess to me and I hope that the work will be finished by the time winter rolls around. Following are a couple of observations of or updates on issues that are presently of interest, at least here on top of the hill. I expect that some of these comments are somewhat controversial, and I will be happy to discuss these issues at the next faculty meeting.

**PeopleSoft.** We survived the changeover to PeopleSoft. While it makes sense to have a common software system, the computer programmers or those who advised the programmers certainly were not end users. The system is not user friendly and makes life for our secretarial and bookkeeping not any easier. Please have some patience with our staff, they are learning every day. It is quite clear that Whitmore adjusted to the personnel cuts by dumping more work on the departments. Eventually, at least that's what we hope, we will tame this dragon and perhaps gain something from this experience.

**Retirements and Lay-offs.** Last year the Department lost 2 secretarial staff, 1.5 technical help, 1 farm laborer, one faculty position, and 1 full-time graduate student assistantship. I don't know what the future will bring us, but much depends upon the economic recovery and its associated increase in tax collections for the Commonwealth. We are still learning to cope with last year's losses but similar cuts will surely devastate the Department and seriously affect our ability to deliver our educational and research programs. Let's keep our fingers crossed.

**New Chancellor.** Dr. Lombardi has been our new chancellor since July 1. Much responsibility lies on his shoulders, not the least of which is to turn the financial status and negative attitudes at this institution around. Dean Willis has met with him a number of times and has positive feelings about the way the new chancellor operates. At the University of Florida, he had strong support from students and alumni, less so of the faculty. He has strong interests in alumni relations (big on sports as a vehicle of university recognition) and is an accomplished fund raiser. Better buy those basketball or hockey tickets now, or else you will be sitting in the end zones. His wife has already been looking at Durfee as a vehicle for fund raising.

The chancellor believes that universities should have a very strong commitment to teaching. He wants to make sure that classes needed for graduation are taught and that it will not interfere with the student's ability to graduate. In that regards we should do alright. He also believes that we should have a strong commitment to research and that an important measure of that excellence is the amount of extramural funding brought in (plus of course the overhead that comes with it). As a Department and individually, we need to work harder on that aspect of our performance. It is clear to me that the undergraduate course review undertaken last year was appropriate and that

we need to pursue that avenue further. As a result some of us, by choice, will focus more on instruction, others more on research. With that in mind I would like to urge you to actively pursue outside funding to a greater degree than was done in the past. One of my expectations for each active researcher is to submit at least two substantial research proposals during the coming year. I will be happy to work with you on these proposals, and Phyllis Berman can help you out with budgets and institutional problems that you may encounter. Multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional are the buzzwords right now. You may notice that I have not touched on extension. That is for a reason, because the chancellor apparently doesn't talk about it much either. He believes that extension develops itself once excellence in teaching and research has been attained. In the past, bureaucratic paper counters in Whitmore generated lots of paperwork to prove or disprove perceived strength or weakness of a particular academic unit. They picked the criteria and in essence the winners. Lombardi apparently leaves it up to individual academic units to develop their own instruments to be measured against. But he will look for continuous improvement. After our faculty meeting with the Dean next week, it should be clear that expansion in extramural funding should be one of our focal points. More about that later.

**Sabbatical Leave.** Dr. Craker will be on sabbatical leave this Fall semester. He intends to catch up on his paperwork and other tasks associated with his program medicinal and aromatic plants. Dr. Gerber has graciously agreed to teach our Junior Writing course in Dr. Craker's absence.

**Fund Raising.** Plans for improving the physical facilities at the turf farm in South Deerfield are well on the way. Depending on whom you are talking to, we are raising 1, 1.5, or 2 million dollars. Whatever the amount is, I think this will be a successful campaign. It will allow us to replace the ancient trailers which were already falling apart when I came here 25 year ago. Additionally, we will try to obtain funding for a sustained operation of the facility with build-in scholarships in support of turf researchers who want to work at that facility. The start of the campaign will kick off sometime in September.

The college is in the process of hiring a new development officer. One of the first projects for the new money person will be a campaign to renovate and expand Durfee Conservatory by adding a 50-foot high addition. This would also contain a small instructional room, toilets, and a small kitchen. My vision is to use the renovated Durfee facility to raise funds for such things like replacing the existing greenhouse structures at French Hall and eventually aim for a new building where we can work together as a department.

**S. Deerfield Farm:** I met with Sam Black, new Head of VAS, and Steve Goodwin in South Deerfield to look at the potential of the entire farm for teaching and research. VAS intends to make it into a working farm, outdoor lab, and research facility in collaboration with Heritage Breeds. The present idea is to have up to 80 head of cattle and/or sheep or goats. Students, doing independent study projects, will be taking care of the animals, taking blood samples and measure anything that can be measured. The idea is to have 3 rotation systems. One would be at the former Riva farm, which is the piece of land with the Glacial Lake Hitchcock sediments. This area will stay unimproved, and will be used strictly for pasture in addition to the soils folks who want to look at the varved sediments. A portion of the river floodplain, currently rented to a potato farmer, will be used as improved pasture, and the existing Dairy barn can be used for controlled feeding. Our contribution would be to help with the agronomic aspects of rotational

pasture, look for soil quality improvement using rotational systems and general soil studies. There also will be a possibility to establish an organic farm and to use some of the land to rotate research plots. The remainder of the land will be used for haying and silage.

There also is a possibility to use part of the Dairy Barn as a replacement for the current Agronomy trailer. We would get rid of the existing trailer and perhaps level the two barns along the south fence that are in bad condition. The barn that is in slightly better shape would get a new roof and other repairs as needed to bring it back to a safe operational condition.

**Student Lounge:** We are contemplating changing the French Hall Library into a student lounge. I generally have the feeling that a lot of our students don't feel connected to our Department. A student lounge would allow students to study, relax, access email and doing school work.

That is about all for today. Hope that this is informative. Please feel free to call me with questions or remarks.