Reflections
John M. Dole
ASHS President

From the Academic Perspective

My first academic teaching experience was as a teaching assistant for Jack Kelly’s Introduction to Horticulture course in 1983. As an undergraduate at Michigan State University, I was lucky to have the opportunity to be a teaching assistant. In addition to helping with grading and organizing the lab, I revised his course manual and actually conducted a couple of the lab periods under the watchful eye of a graduate student. I started teaching as a faculty member in 1989, about 2 weeks after arriving at Oklahoma State University. It was a daunting task—I finished each lecture and lab the night before I had to present it. A couple of years ago I ran into one of the students from my first course and still felt the need to apologize for my lack of preparedness and for being way too hard. The next year was much easier—both on me and on my students. Each year thereafter teaching became easier and more fun and teaching quickly became one of my favorite activities.

Who were your favorite teachers? What were your favorite classes? A number of teachers and classes made an impression on me, starting with my German teacher, Mrs. King, in high school. She recognized my love of nature and artfully integrated it into the class. On a trip to Michigan State University, she invited me along to browse the German section in the library. I brought home a stack of German botany and biology books. She cared for me as a student and worked to make her class more interesting for me and for all of her students.

Over the years, in graduate student exit interviews, students often commented on teachers and courses. Students noticed exemplary faculty—about them I would hear comments such as “I would take any class they offered—even if was teaching from the phone book”, “I could tell that they loved what they are doing and that made me love it as well”, and “they wanted everyone to do well, including me”. Exemplary courses have also made profound impacts on some students, causing them to change their majors or their career directions: “I can’t believe how much I learned” and “The course was hard but worth it”.

The point I would like to make with all of this reminiscing is that, as much as the process of education has changed, the basics are still important. Regardless of the delivery method, students react to the instructor’s passion, competence, command of the classroom (physical or virtual), and concern for the students. And nothing can substitute for those characteristics. We had an instructor at North Carolina State University (NC State) that would be considered old school, a bit gruff, and with no PowerPoints and high expectations. His years of teaching and research meant he knew the material forward and backward and expected his students to know it as well. Yet, the students responded well to him—he wanted each student to do well and they knew that.

Accountability

What has changed is the level of accountability demanded of academic programs. The effectiveness and cost of academic programs is increasingly being scrutinized. Such scrutiny is coming internally from administrators looking to use limited resources as efficiently as possible and meet accreditation standards, and externally from political bodies, industry, and the public. Interestingly, college and university administrators are not the only ones calling for internal accountability. I can tell you from personal experience that many faculty are some of the most vocal proponents of accountability. Why? They are frustrated when they see other faculty using resources, but not being productive.

What does all this scrutiny mean? The more we ask faculty, department heads, and other administrators to document the effectiveness of what they do, the less time they have to make an impact. There has to be a balance. It is hard to describe where that line is, but like good art, you know it when you see it.

Assessment

One of the most obvious means of accountability is assessment. However, say the word assessment and you will
generally get an eye roll or an exasperated sigh from faculty. I realize the frustration faculty feel about more time being taken away from their classes and programs for what they consider to be a useless effort. The fact is assessment has become an important part of academics and is here to stay. The information generated is used for accreditation, department reviews, and, at times, addressing industry and public concerns. However, I try to focus on the original reason for assessment: to make sure our academic programs are as effective as possible and that our students gain as much as possible from their courses. Who can really argue with that? I would encourage faculty to be proactive with assessment. Use the assessment process to ask questions that you are interested in. Turn it into a small research project. Publish the results. Since you have to put the time into assessment, you might as well make it what you want.

**Workforce Development**

A whole different level of accountability is increasingly coming from the political arena. Recently I attended an education meeting hosted by the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce that focused on workforce development. The keynote speaker was our very own Randy Woodson, Chancellor of NC State, former faculty member from horticulture from Purdue, and former President of ASHS. The best innovative programs and collaborations were discussed, focusing not only on 4-year, MS and PhD degrees, but also on 2-year programs and community colleges, certificates, and high school technical training. Many speakers talked about the fact that universities are being (and should be) evaluated and funded not as institutions of learning, but as workforce development entities for job placement. In one sense that should be very good for horticulture. We are an applied field with strong connections to industry.

However, I think many of us would balk at describing ourselves solely as workforce developers. Certainly there is much overlap between education and workforce development: we aim to produce motivated job-ready students. Many skills are critical for students to know and be comfortable using. For instance, I would have a hard time graduating a floriculture student who didn’t know how to water plants. But we must also make sure our students have a broad education that will allow them to be adaptable and succeed in a variety of situations. We not only teach students how to do horticulture, but also the science behind what we do. Thus, students will not only learn what they need for their first position, but they learn “how to learn,” which will allow them to succeed in any subsequent positions.

**Blurring the lines**

Another trend in academics that has become quite clear with the advent of distance education is that the line between extension and academics is increasingly blurry. Traditionally, academics educated students on campus and extension educated them off campus. With the advent of distance education, the classroom is no longer limited to the building and the area served is no longer limited to the county or state line. If a DE course has only county extension educators as students—is that extension or academics? When campus-based teachers offer non-credit courses for industry, governmental agencies, master gardeners, and the general public, the line disappears a little more. On the other hand, no longer bound to an extension center, extension educators are free to reach a broader range of people all over their state and across the country with webinars, videos, etc. Extension educators are also able to provide longer format experiences, such as virtual farm schools and grower’s schools, which are very similar to courses being offered by on campus instructors.

To finish, academics have greatly changed in the many years since I walked into my first classroom. No doubt academics will continue to change. Most of the changes are exciting, both as a teacher and as a student. I often find myself almost wanting to start over to take some of the fun and interesting courses being offered. Other changes are bit more daunting. But we have been well-trained—we have learned how to learn and can adapt accordingly.