Review time for SAES Strategic Plan
— Dr. Donald McDowell, Interim Dean, School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences

WE’VE REACHED THE HALFWAY POINT of the SAES Strategic Plan and it’s time we do two things: take a look at the progress we’ve made and then examine our plan in light of internal and external changes that have occurred since we adopted the plan in 2005-06.

And the time is ripe for this work. You can read in this document the highlights and progress we’ve made towards achieving those goals we established in the SAES Strategic Plan. In fact, I’ll mention some of them in this column. But because of the interim changes in the Dean’s Office this is a good time to examine where we are and to make sure that we are still relevant and on track. Having a change at the top allows a different perspective and eye to conduct the evaluation.

Why do this now?
Earlier this year the UNC Board of Governors evaluated the state’s public universities to assess their contributions to the economic status of the communities where they are located and the state in general. This effort was called UNC Tomorrow. With that information in hand, UNC President Erskine Bowles asked each institution to develop a response to UNC Tomorrow with an examination of existing efforts and plans for future efforts. A&T complied. We in the SAES will examine A&T’s response and the system’s complete document to see where we need to refocus or reshape our work so we are in compliance with UNC Tomorrow. The SAES is at the forefront because of our land-grant mission to focus on teaching, research and engagement. Now everybody is getting on track. We intend to lead this effort.

As well, our new chancellor is beginning to develop a new University strategic plan. We want to make sure that his efforts and plans for A&T also are reflected in the work we do in the SAES.

So you see our job will be to take the SAES Strategic Plan and merge it with UNC Tomorrow, the University’s strategic plan, and funding provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill. I have no doubt that the direction we’re headed is the right one. I’m also confident that when we started out, we had our sights set in the right direction.

We have our work cut out for us.
So let’s take a quick look back at last year’s progress.

The SAES’s 2007-08 academic year started with the spotlight on our own Dr. Mohamed Ahmedna and his groundbreaking research on removing peanut allergies. National and international media focused on A&T. While this was excellent for Dr. Ahmedna, it also was a time to showcase the SAES and the University. This kind of publicity can impact student and faculty recruitment, fundraising and external grant approvals. Dr. Ahmedna’s work touches on a number of the 11 themes that make up our strategic plan, including commitments to advance biotechnology and innovative technologies; to attract and graduate outstanding students; to expand the resource base and maximize relationships; and to ensure a nutritious, safe and secure food supply.

Dr. Ahmedna was also a key figure in a second SAES milestone this year. Seydou Niandou Albachir became the first A&T student granted a doctorate from the University’s interdisciplinary Energy and Environmental Studies Program. Ahmedna was his advisor for a research-based dissertation on drinking-water purification.

Albachir wasn’t the only SAES student whose accomplishments should serve to remind us that the first two themes in our Strategic Plan focus on the student learning environment. More than 500 SAES students were recipients of awards, scholarships, certificates or honors in the 2007-08 academic year; and SAES students were awarded $1.1 million in scholarships, assistantships, and other types of financial support this past year.

And by May of 2008, 22.1 percent of the SAES students from the freshman class of 2002 had received degrees — a significantly higher graduation rate than the University’s overall rate of 14.8 percent for the freshman class of 2002. This isn’t great, but it’s one of our key priorities for the coming year.

On the research side, our faculty had a stellar year, publishing results from quests for food preservatives with antimicrobial power to combat Salmonella and E. coli, and from research into supplementing diets of dairy cows so milk is a health enhancement for humans. Last year’s ARP publications listing also includes a method for assessing soil quality on farm land nourished by cover crops, and research into the potential for using mushroom extracts and probiotics to improve the growth rates and health of broiler chickens. The ARP total of $12.3 million in funding last year represents 13 percent over the previous year.

The Cooperative Extension Program has responded to some new demands for fulfilling the Strategic Plan’s pledge to “Empower Individuals, Families and Communities.” Extension was part of two major coalitions of state agencies pulled together to address the hot-button need for financial literacy in middle- and low-income families — a need the N.C. General Assembly has underscored with legislation requiring financial literacy education for high school sophomores.

As well, Cooperative Extension had programs that addressed the sudden pressure on small-scale livestock producers and rural communities to prepare for outbreaks of animal-borne diseases.

The work we’ve done is admirable. People are talking. And as we continue our work, we want to give them something else to talk about.

At the start of the 2005-06 academic year, the SAES unveiled its five-year strategic plan, Planning for Our Preferred Future, which is organized around 11 primary themes. The plan balances the expectations that stakeholders have for the SAES against the emerging issues the SAES must address if it is going to continue to lead our Preferred Future.

Albachir

• When the SAES set its sights on “Planning for Our Preferred Future,” our first two primary themes put a commitment to our students quite appropriately at the forefront. When Seydou Niandou Albachir received his doctorate from A&T in December of 2007, the degree underscored the SAES commitments to “Maintain a Responsive Learning Environment” and to “Attract and Graduate Outstanding Students.”

• By Commencement Day 2006, 22.1 percent of the SAES students from the freshman class of 2002 received degrees — a significantly higher graduation rate than the University’s overall rate of 14.8 percent for the freshman class of 2002. The Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Design led the way this past academic year with a graduation rate of 40 percent.

• At the University’s 2007 Honors Day Convocation, 188 of the 704 SAES undergraduate students (more than one-fifth) were recognized for overall GPAs of 3.0 or above. A total of 219 undergraduates, which includes 192 students from the 2007-2008 academic year. SAES students were awarded a grand total of $1.1 million in scholarships, assistantships, and other types of financial support in the 2007-08 academic year.

• The number of student credit hours generated by the SAES has grown from 11,989 to 13,721 and then to 13,925 in the past three academic years — an increase of 16.1 percent in three years since the Strategic Plan was unveiled.

• The SAES lived up to its role as a major partner at the North Carolina Research Campus (and a major Strategic Plan theme to “Ensure a Nutritious, Safe and Secure Food Supply”) by providing initial staffing and equipment for the Center of Excellence for Post-Harvest Technologies. In Feb. of 2007, a special SAES faculty summit was convened to set groundwork for fully amalgamating the next phase of development at the Center of Excellence for Post-Harvest Technologies into the SAES Strategic Plan.

• Cooperative Extension continues to lead the way in SAES progress toward specific goals in a Strategic Plan theme directing energies and resources to “Empower Individuals, Families and Communities.” The Cooperative Extension Program was part of the coalition that made the NC4Saves campaign a high-profile public information effort that blanketed the state with strategies for combating the paycheck-to-paycheck approach to family resource management that leaves too many North Carolina families on shaky financial footing. A&T Extension’s family financial management specialist was also part of the team that trained high school teachers and volunteers across the state to implement an updated financial planning program for high school students — an important resource now that there is a state law requiring that financial literacy be taught to 10th graders.

• The Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Design now has three research projects with Evans-Allen funding focused on the Strategic Plan’s commitment to “Advance Biotechnology and Biodiversity.” A member of the department faculty who received two awards for teaching this past spring also received the Dean of the School of Agricultural and Consumer Sciences’ Teaching Award for outstanding contributions to teaching, and received a merit award for contributions to biofuels research, a pair of SAES research projects was spotlighted for break-throughs in food safety research, another was a revealing study of the socioeconomic of childhood obesity and the sixth offered a new source of nutrients — peanut-based powdered milk — for malnourished children in developing nations.

• Cooperative Extension’s support for SAES progress toward specific goals in a Strategic Plan directive to “Ensure the Viability of Small-Scale Agriculture” was noteworthy in the 2007-2008 academic year. Two Extension specialists are heading up a $250,000 USDA grant, announced in the fall of 2007 that is already off the ground and establishing educational demonstration sites for small-scale

Planning for Our Preferred Future

Theme 1: Maintain a Responsive Learning Environment

Theme 2: Attract and Graduate Outstanding Students

Theme 3: Improve Minority and Environmental Health

Theme 4: Ensure a Nutritious, Safe and Secure Food Supply

Theme 5: Empower Individuals, Families and Communities

Theme 6: Advance Biotechnology and Biodiversity

Theme 7: Ensure the Viability of Small-Scale Agriculture

Theme 8: Protect the Environment and Natural Resources

Theme 9: Promote International Trade and Economic Development

Theme 10: Use Innovative Technologies

Theme 11: Expand Resource Base and Maximize Relationships

The SAES’ Center of Excellence for Post-Harvest Technologies on the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis will be devoted to research into food preservation, processing, packaging, storage, distribution and marketing.

SAES beachhead on the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis — was substantial, and the SAES is now a full partner in the $1.5 billion, 350-acre campus.

• Research scientists and Extension specialists from A&T and the 17 other 1892 land-grants were invited to submit proposals for presentations at a biannual conference, and of the 32 projects selected, six had SAES faculty on the project team. While two SAES research projects were singled out for their contributions to biofuels research, a pair of SAES research projects was spotlighted for breakthroughs in food safety research, another was a revealing study of the socioeconomic of childhood obesity and the sixth offered a new source of nutrients — peanut-based powdered milk — for malnourished children in developing nations.

Ahmenda

• The chairman of the Animal Sciences Department, Dr. Ralph Noble, received tribute for the expertise he has been lending to small-scale goat producers in North Carolina that was truly a grassroots’ recognition. Noble was honored with a service award by the Grassroots Partners — a coalition of North Carolina’s minority small-farm cooperatives.

• The American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers (ASABE) celebrated its 100th anniversary with an annual meeting in Minneapolis with special attention on emerging technologies and SAES research was well-represented at the meeting. SAES projects showcased at the ASABE meeting included a geospatial database for planning and development at the University Farm, research into equipping farm equipment with global positioning systems, and research into new uses for food byproducts using a bioreactor to isolate organisms.

• An SAES food scientist, Dr. Mohamed Ahmenda, put the phrase “A researcher with North Carolina A&T State University ...” into news television and newspapers across the country when he was granted a patent for a process to inactivate peanut allergens. One of his colleagues with the Agricultural Research Program has a patent pending for a new method for preventing outbreaks of foodborne illnesses from contaminated ground beef, and another has filed for a patent for an innovation in food packaging.

• The Agricultural Research Program received overall funding of $12,357,426 — $6,784,428 in base federal and state funds, and competitive funding of $5,573,018 for research and sponsored programs — an increase of 13 percent over the previous year. The progress made on staffing and equipping the Center of Excellence for Post-Harvest Technologies — the

Noble

The SAES Strategic Plan’s 11 Primary Themes
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MARK YOUR CALENDAR
AUG. 13
• University-wide opening day program A&T faculty and staff

• Extension field staff training (9 a.m.)

• SAES academic year kickoff (3 p.m.)

AUG. 18
First day of classes, fall semester

OCT. 11
Homecoming

Nelson and Mary James of Maple Hill were named the 2008 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmers of the Year. Extension guidance in mapping out a plan for their 20-acre farm has steered the Jameses into more than a dozen alternative enterprises.