Dr. Mac’s Moment: 2008–09 Highlights in Harmony with SAES Strategic Plan
— Dr. Donald McDowell, Interim Dean, School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences

The five-year strategic plan that was introduced to the SAES faculty staff and students at the beginning of the 2008-06 academic year will soon become primarily a guide for developing a succeeding five-year plan, which will be implemented at the start of the 2010-11 academic year. That’s one of our major projects for this year.

But before we get too busy planning for the next five years, we still have to respect the Plan’s final two years as a measuring stick for instruction, research and Extension. It’s time to look back and see how the major accomplishments the past academic year stacked up against our 11 major themes and specific goals.

The SAES Strategic Plan leads off with a firm commitment to a learning environment that responds to the changing needs of our students and recognizes faculty who lead the way in responsiveness. At the University’s 2009 Honors Day Convocation, we got a clear picture of where we stand in that regard, as 26 percent of the students pursuing degrees in the SAES were recognized for maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or better. A few weeks later at spring commencement exercises, 45 percent of our graduates did so with honors.

When our students graduate prepared, they do so primarily because of the faculty and staff working with them. Many of our faculty members were honored in one way or another for their contributions, but three of those recognitions are particularly meritorious.

Dr. Godfrey Ejimakor of the Agribusiness, Applied Economics and Agriscience Education Department was the SAES recipient of the 2008–09 Teacher of the Year Award. A&T’s Academy for Teaching and Learning named Dr. Rosemarie Vardell of the Family and Consumer Sciences Department one of two recipients of its Junior Faculty Teaching Excellence Award. Dr. Tracy Hanner, coordinator for the SAES Lab Animal Science Program, was presented the Iverson Bell Recognition Award by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges.

The SAES also added to its student drawing power considerably this past academic year. The Animal Sciences Department received approval for a certificate program in equine management, and approval also came through for a Master of Art in Teaching (MAT) in FCS. And, as of fall semester 2009, students can now complete work on a master’s in agricultural economics completely online. A grant of $1.5 million from W.K. Kellogg Foundation to create an endowed chair in sustainable, community-based food systems was announced in the fall of 2009, and some of this funding will go to developing courses relevant to sustainable agriculture.

The addition of the Sensory Evaluation Laboratory in Benbow Hall will contribute to both student instruction and food science research. The Sensory Lab is being used by students and researchers to scientifically evaluate individual reactions to the tastes of foods. Another FCS dual-purpose resource, the Child Development Laboratory, received a 2009 Early Childhood Professional Development Award — presented by the N.C. Division of Child Development and other agencies — which recognizes exemplary early care and education programs that also promote teacher education.

Last October, The Center of Excellence for Post-Harvest Technologies in Kannapolis was officially dedicated along with other universities’ facilities on the North Carolina Research Campus. We now have key research faculty and staff on board, and labs with state-of-the art scientific equipment ready to roll. We expect that in the coming academic year the Center will begin to realize some of its tremendous potential for research into food safety, storage, processing and preservation.

We generated approximately $6.5 million in competitive funds to complement base and formula funding of $30.7 million. Of the 47 funding proposals we submitted during the 2008–09 academic year, 32 were funded. Our overall research funding of $13,254,534 for the past academic year represents an increase of 7.1 percent from 2007–08. Funding for research projects added up to more than a half-million dollars in assistantships for 110 SAES students. Increased funding support for international studies made it possible for SAES student participation to increase by 500 percent, and to send students to more than 10 countries.

As during other national economic recessions, The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T has delivered educational programming to a large new wave of the state’s citizens who are trying to get by with limited resources at the same time that Cooperative Extension itself (along with the SAES, the University and all state and federal agencies) is looking over its shoulder apprehensively at traditional funding sources. Cooperative Extension’s most recent annual report includes financial literacy training for 2,000 limited-resource families in select communities. The Farmers Adopting Computer Technology (FACT) program was used by 17 community colleges, and the three community colleges added to the roster recently did so pointedly to enhance workforce development in their regions.

Last year was a challenge, but as evident by a few examples in this column and still more inside, the SAES remained on the move.
The SAES 2008-09 annual report incorporates highlights and benchmarks from departmental and unit reports that support the 11 major themes and contribute to progress toward specific goals in the SAES five-year strategic plan, Planning Our Preferred Future.

• The SAES Strategic Plan is composed of 11 major themes, and the first and second of them reflect longstanding priorities that went into the Plan’s organization. The Plan’s first theme directs the SAES to “Maintain a Responsive Learning Environment” and the second is organized around a commitment to “Attract and Graduate Outstanding Students.” The strongest theme to bow well the SAES measured up to its goals regarding the learning environment and the caliber and cost our students came at A&T State University’s 2009 Honors Day Convocation, where 180 SAES undergraduate students — 26 percent of total enrollment in the 2008-2009 academic year — were recognized for maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or better. A few weeks later at spring commencement exercises 45 percent of the SAES’s 80 graduates did so with honors.

• The Department of Animal Sciences received the go-ahead to add a certificate program in equine management to its offerings, the Department of Public Instruction gave final approval for a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in Family and Consumer Sciences Education, and curriculum revisions were incorporated to position the undergraduate food science program for the Institute for Food Technologies accreditation.

• The SAES Strategic Plan’s third major theme is “Improving Minority and Environmental Health,” and two major milestones in this regard took place during the 2008-2009 academic year. The Center of Excellence for Post-Harvest Technologies was officially dedicated along with the rest of the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis. With faculty and staff now in place along with state-of-the-art scientific equipment, the Center has begun to realize a research agenda that encompasses food storage, processing, preservation and safety concerns. The 2008-2009 academic year will also go down as a landmark year for SAES progress in environmental health because of a landmark grant of $1.5 million from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to establish an endowed chair in sustainable, community-based food systems. A new interdisciplinary honor’s course, “Sustaining Agriculture, Food, Fiber, Nutrition and Community for Humanity’s Future,” has been added to the SAES curriculum.

• A benchmark contribution to the Strategic Plan’s commitment to “Ensure a Nutritious, Safe and Secure Food Supply” was the completion of the Sensory Evaluation Laboratories in Benbow Hall during the spring semester 2009. The facility is being used by students in the food sciences program, as well as by researchers who are developing new food products.

• More than half of the 2008 issue of the Agricultural Research Program’s annual magazine, RE:search, was devoted to features on functional foods with enriched probiotic value, new niches in the biotech industry and breeding developments for the organic pork industry. The SAES Strategic Plan’s “Advance Biotechnology and Biodiversity” theme also resonated at the 2008 joint annual meeting of the American Dairy Science Association and the American Society of Animal Science in Indianapolis, where there were six poster sessions including research into molecular patterns and bovine neutrophil activation, gene expression in E. coli, and the use of lactic acid bacteria to detect chemical substances in milk.

• The Cooperative Extension Program now has 17 of the state’s community colleges using its Farmers Adopting Computer Technology (FACT) program to train farmers in computer basics. In another of Extension’s major outreaches for small-scale agriculture, a food scientist joined with two Extension specialists to address public concern for outbreaks of foodborne illness instigated by contaminated produce with a series of train-the-trainers workshops centered on the Practical Agriculture Practices (GAPs) for produce production and handling.

• In the 2008-2009 academic year, the SAES rattled up student global studies participation (the backbone of the Strategic Plan’s tenth theme) by 52 percent over the 2007-2008 academic year. The jump was fueled by financial support from a USDA Capacity Building Grant that helped send SAES students to more than 12 countries for study and other international experiences.

• The tenth major theme in the SAES Strategic Plan is a commitment to “Using Innovation, Technology, and the Agribusiness and Applied Economics Program through in flying colors in this regard by putting everything in place for students to complete work on major’s degrees in Agricultural Economics completely online.

• This past academic year, the SAES generated approximately $6.3 million in competitive funds to complement the SAES base and formula funding of $30.7 million. Through Agricultural Research Program funding, there were assistantships for 53 undergraduate and 67 graduate students for a total of $514,381.

• The chair of the Department of Animal Sciences, the University Farm manager and the program coordinator for the Cooperative Extension Program’s work in agriculture and natural resource management shared the Dean’s 2008-2009 Collabration Award for their work with teams from N.C. State University and the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The award-winning collaborative work was a study of the state’s network of 17 agricultural research stations and recommendations for channeling infrastructure improvements and management of the stations into a much closer relationship with SAES research and the University Farm.

• The SAES chalked up two achievements in the 2008-2009 academic year that fill the bill quite nicely for the Strategic Plan’s concluding major theme, expansion of the school’s resource base and collaboration network. L.C. Cooper, an SAES alumnus and former president of North Carolina’s Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, endowed $102,000 to the SAES. Cooper’s generosity was recognized with the Alumni Excellence Award, presented by his alma mater at spring commencement. Also, plans were finalized in spring 2009 for the $6.8 million Horse Park of the South, a multi-purpose equestrian center in Rockingham County that will include an SAES equine facility with stalls for a dozen horses, a smart classroom that will accommodate 152 people, and storage facilities.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR
AUG. 17
First day of fall semester classes
OCT. 19–20
Fall break
OCT. 31
Homecoming (vs Bethune-Cookman)

The 2009 Research Apprentice Program brought a select group of 20 high school students to the A&T campus for four weeks in July. The 20 juniors and seniors invited to participate worked closely with an SAES research scientist on a project. This summer’s RAP students got their on-campus introductions to scientific research augmented with field trips to the Natural Science Center in Greensboro and to the newest resource in the Agricultural Research Program repertoire: the Center of Excellence for Post Harvest Technologies at the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis.

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