

Jim Meyer

Former UC Davis Chancellor

Jim Meyer joined UC in 1951 as an instructor of animal husbandry at the Davis campus. He was appointed chair of the Department of Animal Science nine years later and in 1963 was named dean of the College of Agriculture. He went on to serve as chancellor of UC Davis from 1969 to 1987. During his tenure as chancellor, four new campuswide divisions and the Graduate School of Management were established, and enrollment jumped from 12,000 to nearly 20,000 students. Retired since 1987, Meyer is now actively researching what the future may hold for Land Grant colleges of agriculture.



At the time you joined the University, what was the mood in agriculture and in the University?

JM: The mood was really quite upbeat. In those days you started as an instructor and spent 2 years before you became an assistant professor. The 2-year program was phased out by 1956–58. Then Clark Kerr began to decentralize the university and in 1959, the master plan for higher education was written. So it was a very exciting time, a time of change.

Enrollment went down in the late '50s and '60s. There was a move from farmers being the main element of agriculture to the development of the agricultural industry, of which farmers were a part. Soon, as much effort in the production of food was made by those off the farm as on the farm, supplying the fertilizers, the pesticides and so forth. So agriculture was changing, which was one reason student enrollment went down — not as many farmers were needed.

Mechanization began in the 1960s and had a dramatic impact. A second dramatic impact was Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, and pesticides became an issue. With that, plus the concern about a broader approach to the environment, this college changed its name to the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences in 1968.

We had a very exciting time in our college here. The faculty and administration were responding to the needs in agriculture. At the same time, we were looking to the future and seeing the problems of pesticides, environmental quality and so on.

The vice president's office in agriculture at that time delegated authority to the deans on campuses to take care of problems. There were major problems such as pear decline, on which this campus's pomology department did a lot. A move toward mechanization led to the development of the mechanical tomato harvester and new varieties of tomatoes. Then, of course, there was the decrease in farm labor needs. The starlings also were a problem and that was kind of a fun project. They did solve it pretty much; they aren't a problem any more. Verticillium wilt caused problems in cotton in the Central Valley. It was a great time for the college to solve problems.

What were society's expectations of the colleges of agriculture?

JM: I don't think society had any expectation because food was readily available and it was of high quality. The expectations shifted from farmers to the agri-industry side, the big commercial companies such as the fertilizer companies. They organized into associations and greatly influenced the agricultural colleges.

Looking at changes that took place, let me emphasize the three functions of a land-grant college — teaching, research and outreach or extension. As far as teaching is concerned, the land grant colleges of agriculture shifted to more basic courses and started to offer new courses that the public would be interested in.

Researchwise, this college and other agricultural colleges across the United States contributed a great deal. Over time, the research changed. In the past, the faculty did more applied research, but a lot of the applied research eventually moved to industry since industry provided so many of the inputs such as fertilizer, pesticides and so forth. Industry could make money by doing the research and developing new products. Take Calgene, for example. Now industry is doing very applied, technological research.

A lot of the demonstration research has moved into Extension. Farm advisors are now doing research — taking a known principle and applying it to different environmental situations. Industry changes have had quite an impact on agricultural and environmental sciences.

The other way that Extension has changed is that private groups — that is, paid consultants — have started doing extension work for hire. They might have 10 or 20 dairies that they consult with and visit once a month. They look at the computer system, talk about the price of feed and work on problems such as mastitis. A lot of the extension work is now done by these people. It's growing faster in California than in any other state.

I think change was bound to continue, and I don't think that's bad. But just as we responded to changes in the 1950s and '60s, the system is going to have to respond to new changes now.

The original driving force for the land-grant colleges was to meet agriculture's needs. When they were started, the poor people of this country were on farms. So the land-grant concept was started to improve the quality of life for the people on the farms. One of the ways to do that was to improve the productivity of the farms.

Then, of course, the farmers became fewer and fewer in number. Now what is the driving force? The driving force will no doubt be population pressure. Because we have expertise in natural resources, all of these colleges will work on problems of environmental quality as it pertains to food production and quality of life. On this campus, there are several environmentally oriented departments; even in the Department of Animal Science, research is moving toward environmental science, which includes pollution. For example, we have a faculty member who primarily works on manure management. This department, in looking at its future research, is looking at both the environmental and food production sciences. It may be that environmental problems will keep this kind of institution in business for the foreseeable future.

What were UC's most significant research and extension contributions during those years, particularly in your area of expertise?

JM: I think the faculty's research quality at both the applied and basic levels was excellent. In teaching, the main contribution was to broaden the curriculum to include environmental studies and courses. Research and extension had to go hand in hand. The faculty did a good job of problem solving so that new processes and industries could evolve.

In the specific area of animal sciences, the nutritionists and physiologists did applied and basic research, such as on bloat. The geneticists worked on the problem of dwarfing in beef cattle. We moved into net-energy systems for evaluating livestock feed, and sheep researchers became interested in twinning. You can't pick out anything specifically, because you had about 16 activities coming together at the same time.

How have societal changes over the last 50 years influenced the Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources?

JM: One of the big changes has been that women have come into the department and campuses. Now it seems like

one out of three new hires in animal science is a woman. We also have Barbara Schneeman as dean. This resulted in an enlarged pool of excellence for the College.

Looking toward the future, what is the most important task for the Division and for UC?

JM: I think the Division needs to catch up with societal needs and the efficiency of decentralized decision making. We need to respond to the impact of population growth on environmental quality and food needs. People will say that so far we've been able to keep up with population growth, but we need to look to the future and consider how population growth has and will impact air and water quality. Of course this is a problem so big that it will require the attention of more than just the colleges of agriculture. An entire campus must be involved.

What have you discovered in your studies for the Kellogg Foundation on how to effect change in the land-grant colleges of agriculture?

JM: Each state must respond to the driving forces of its own population and environmental concerns. UC Davis's agricultural college did lead the way starting in the 1960s, signified by its name change in 1968. New England has responded quickly, the South much more slowly. I don't know how California will respond.

I'm sure almost all of the colleges of agriculture will focus on the environmental issues. They'll have to address problems both of the environment and of agriculture. But environmental issues will be the driving force. Their clientele will be consumers, environmental interests and the agricultural industry. Leaders of agricultural colleges throughout the country realize that there will be great variation between the states.

But teaching, research and extension will always be their main functions. These colleges must decide who their clientele will be and look to the state and federal governments for funding.

In the land-grant colleges, leadership will be key. The colleges will find that their main connections to the federal government will be not only through the U.S. Department of Agriculture but also through the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. I see that as positive.

-Pat Bailey

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