In early May, I convened a general meeting of EH faculty, staff and students to address some issues of these challenging times that might be generating anxiety about the future of the EH Department. I wanted to reassure everyone that our department is strong and vibrant and doing an outstanding job of fulfilling our mission and responding to the needs of the people of California. My “state of EH” presentation focused on the recent progress we, as a department, have made in the areas of teaching, research and outreach. In addition, I wanted to give everyone my perspective on the budget and how we intend to deal with this looming problem.

Our Teaching Mission is Strong

The Environmental Horticulture and Urban Forestry (EHUF) major underwent review last year and received a positive evaluation from the university. I see it as a personal challenge to build on this and be more responsive to the needs of students. One way to accomplish this is to increase the number of offerings of ENH 1, Introduction to Environmental Horticulture and Urban Forestry. This science-based, “general education” course, taught by Prof. Dave Burger, satisfies general curriculum requirements and attracts students to our major.

The Environmental Horticulture Club comprised of undergraduate and graduate students has been very active, putting on plant sales and taking field trips. EH Club members promote the department to other students and the world around us. It is an excellent complement to the formal curriculum and I am committed to helping the EH Club succeed in its activities.

Regarding student recruitment, I am currently focusing on the state’s community college system as a valuable source of students for our major. Typically, these students already have a proven track record for success and go on to become productive members of the green industry. I think this group is underrepresented in terms of recruitment for UC Davis as a whole and I am currently working with the Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions to attract community college students to all programs on campus. I am finding, to my horror, that many potential EH transfers are either not aware of our outstanding EHUF program or have the incorrect perception that we are too selective and don’t want them.

Research is Our Foundation

The EH department has an outstanding track record for high-quality research and this is something we absolutely must continue to promote. One of the indicators of our success in this area is the amount of grant funding brought in by faculty; we have done quite well in this area and I encourage faculty to continue to be as active in this area as possible.

Another indicator of success is our publication productivity; we have done an excellent job in this area. This is only possible because of the innovativeness of the faculty and dedicated expertise of staff and students. By all measures of productivity, EH is excellent.

Over the past decade, our ability to do high-quality research has been somewhat impacted by the decreasing number of scientists in the department (due to retirements). Associate Dean Mike Parrella and I have been working with the USDA to establish a presence in Environmental Horticulture at UC Davis. Industry leaders have also emphasized the importance of this to USDA officials. I am currently working with USDA leaders to create a Floriculture position. This position will be stationed in EH and will help us strengthen our research and outreach programs. We hope to be able to announce specifics on this and future growth later this year.

New to our departmental research program is the establishment of an IR4 center for research on agricultural chemicals and biocontrol agents <http://envhort.ucdavis.edu/ir4>. IR4 (Interregional Research Project #4) is a federal program that facilitates the registration of such materials for use on specialty crops including ornamentals. Participating in this program will bring revenue to the department and provide opportunities for student projects and internships. It also provides a significant service to the ornamentals industry in that we help them bring important and powerful new tools to market. We are currently canvassing the industry to identify needed projects.

The faculty in Environmental Horticulture is actively involved in leading the campus in various research-related initiatives. We are actively participating in strategic planning in the Plant Sciences to look for synergism between faculty from the various plant science departments. We are also...
involved in efforts to improve management of facilities in the college (e.g. greenhouses). Other areas include planning in “Sustainable Agriculture” and “International Horticulture”.

Our Outreach Efforts are Expanding

The outreach and extension mission of the EH Department is increasing and changing with the times. Together with the Environmental Design Department, we recently hired Dr. Loren Oki as our Landscape Extension Specialist and he already has a number of important projects in collaboration with faculty and industry. We are currently working on a job description for the statewide Master Gardener Coordinator position which will be based in Environmental Horticulture. This will be an opportunity to increase the visibility of EH to those involved in the Master Gardener program and for us to contribute to this valuable public service.

All of our Cooperative Extension faculty are continuing to work hard to extend research-based information to clientele on a statewide basis. They maintain important collaborations with county-based Cooperative Extension personnel and are devising innovative ways to extend information in the current restricted budgetary environment.

As an addition to our grounds and teaching garden, I am in the process of developing demonstration gardens and field trial areas at the department where plant companies can have us test the performance of their varieties in our Central Valley climate. Several companies that would be interested in participating have approached me. Our superintendent of agriculture, Ron Lane, and his greenhouse staff are studying the feasibility of this project in light of the campus plan to build a hotel and conference center on the south side of our grounds. As part of our commitment to move forward in this area, I have appointed Prof. Jim Harding and Dr. Loren Oki as co-directors of the gardens.

Another exciting outreach project that I have been working on is the establishment of an Urban Horticulture Center for the state of California on the UC Davis campus. We have formed a committee to develop this project consisting of Kathleen Socolofsky, the Director of the Davis Arboretum; Heath Schenker, the Chair of the Landscape Architecture Program; Bob Segar, campus planner and myself. The center will be a focal point for urban horticulture research and outreach, and offer programs with statewide interest. We hope this will be located in a building within the new, high-profile campus entry neighborhood. We are currently developing a planning strategy. This involves fact finding which will take us to various places to see how other organizations have responded to the needs of urban horticulture clients.

An increasingly important aspect of outreach involves development of extra-mural funding for programs. I am very much involved in this process and am working with several potential benefactors to do great things for environmental horticulture in California. One example is the establishment of endowed chairs to secure faculty research programs in particular areas of need. To date we have statements of intent to provide substantial funding for an endowed chair in rose breeding and a second endowed chair for arboriculture. We are searching for persons who would be willing to contribute to these. We are also very open to other initiatives for endowed chairs in the area of environmental horticulture.

The Budget- Present and Future

We are doing everything possible to deal with the current bleak budget situation. We are seeking innovative ways to sustain the department, some of which I have already mentioned. We have just been informed of some fairly major budget cuts in Cooperative Extension and because most of extension funds are in salaries, it will be a challenge to find ways to manage these cuts. It is our intention to avoid lay-offs. Our experience with IR4 this year proves that we can avoid lay-offs of experienced, dedicated staff by shifting their efforts to other projects.

A by-product of our recent success in obtaining outside grants is that some of the indirect costs come back to the department. We are committed to using these funds to promote our ability to do research because it is our productivity that benefits us and California in the long run.

Even though next year we may realize some fairly painful budget cuts, I am encouraging everyone in EH to look for opportunities to build, not cut, the department’s activities. We should look for ways to expand our teaching programs because this funding will remain strong. The department’s recent acquisition of laboratory and office space in the new Plant and Environmental Sciences Building is a positive step and gives us room to grow. The fact that we can accommodate new faculty or USDA researchers will help us in filling these positions.

It should be noted that, while we intend to take good care of our excellent and dedicated faculty and staff and to preserve the investment that California has made in EH, there will be a significant effect on the public. We will no longer be able to provide assistance in problem solving at no cost. We will not be able to travel to meetings unless the costs are covered. We will shift our research to funded projects, abandoning important work that has little or no funding basis. In other words, with the State removing a huge portion of its support for us, we must privatize a part of our operation.