

A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

CALS Dean bids fond farewell

BY KAREN BRASHER



AFTER SERVING a decade as dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and director of the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, **DR. GEORGE HOPPER** retired June 30, 2020.

His role as dean and director for CALS and MAFES were not expected when he returned to his alma mater to assume a role in leadership. After spending over two decades at the University of Tennessee, an opportunity presented itself to become dean of the College of Forest Resources and director of the Forest and Wildlife Research Center. Hopper jumped at the chance to come home and make a difference for the university that he loved. However, the position turned into more than he originally planned.

After just three years as dean and director of the College of Forest Resources and the Forest and Wildlife Research Center, respectively, the financial crisis of 2008 changed Hopper's course.

"We were exploring every avenue to save money," Hopper said. "Our state funding was cut by 25 percent, and there were discussions about merging colleges

and departments, and any other measure that would save funds. It was a difficult time for our university."

At the request of Dr. Mark Keenum, Hopper took the helm of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, or MAFES, first in an interim role and then as permanent dean and director.

"Early in my presidency, during a time of austerity and budget cuts in all state institutions, George was Dean of the College of Forest Resources and agreed to take on the additional role of Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. I will be forever indebted to him for serving his alma mater in that manner," said MSU President Mark E. Keenum.

Hopper embraced his role as dean

of two units and director of two separately funded research units, always ensuring that everyone understood his mantra that student success comes first.

"I truly believe that we are all here for a purpose and that purpose, for our university, is to impact the lives of our students," Hopper said.

His drive to improve student outcomes resulted in enrollment growth from

1,556 students in 2009 to 2,559 students in 2019. Degrees awarded went up 56 percent, and new undergraduate majors, online graduate programs, and certificate programs were added to fill needs in emerging fields.

Hopper also expanded participation in programs such as study abroad and professional experience. He initiated the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program and increased scholarship funding by 60 percent. The development portfolio in the college grew by 133 percent during his administration.

Hopper made numerous upgrades to facilities on- and off-campus. MAFES includes 16 off-campus branch experiment stations. The MAFES repairs and renovations program, aptly named Operation Facelift, saw an injection of



LEFT: Agronomy major Anna Gaudin, Dr. George Hopper, and former agronomy graduate student Salah Jumaa talk about sesame at the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station's Soil-Plant-Atmosphere Research Unit. (photo by April Garon)

BOTTOM LEFT: Drs. George and Missy Hopper at the 2019 CALS homecoming breakfast. (photo by Karen Brasher)

BOTTOM LEFT: Dr. George Hopper (right) and Dr. Reuben Moore serve ice cream at the MAFES Sales Store to celebrate National Ice Cream Month. (photo by Megan Bean)

LEFT: Dr. George Hopper at the opening of the Community Garden. (photo by Megan Bean)



\$6.5 million during his tenure. Included in Operation Facelift was the addition of the West Farm and the National Center for Alluvial Aquifer Research at the Delta Research and Extension Center in Stoneville. Also upgrades to the four Research and Extension Centers occurred during his tenure.

On campus, Hopper led the new animal science complex with construction of the Meat Science and Muscle Biology Laboratory and the Animal and Dairy Sciences building. The Poultry Science building is slated for completion in October 2020. Also, under his leadership, the Custer Dairy Plant, Herzer Building, and both farms saw upgrades, including an irrigation systems project at North Farm and the Blackbelt Branch Experiment Station.

He has also made an impact on the national stage, assuming leadership roles at the state and national level. He has served as chair of the Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy, the governing body of the Experiment Station Section of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities Commission on Food, Environment, and Renewable Resources. He was honored for his leadership in 2017, with receipt of the Southern Association of Agricultural Experiment Station Directors

ESS Excellence in Leadership Award.

His leadership in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and MAFES has propelled the college and research unit as among the best in the nation. And while the opportunity was unexpected, it proved to be beneficial to the university, colleges, and research units.

In all of his accomplishments, Hopper is quick to acknowledge all of the support he received throughout

his tenure at Mississippi State.

“I am so appreciative to the faculty, staff, alumni, and advisory boards for partnering with me to strengthen and build our programs in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station,” Hopper said. “I am grateful to all of the individuals that have helped along the way and honored to have led these incredible organizations.” 🐾

A LEGACY OF EXCELLENCE

IN HONOR of Dr. George Hopper's legacy of leadership, an endowed fund has been established in the Mississippi State University Foundation to support students. The Dr. George Hopper Student Development Fund for Excellence may be used to support student travel to attend conferences or competitions, student awards, student support for books and tuition, and other student development opportunities.

Interim Dean Scott Willard established the fund to honor Hopper's legacy and his main passion, students.

“Dr. Hopper was a mentor and friend as I served him as associate dean,” Willard said. “I have heard him say so many times that ‘we are here for the students.’ His driving force was the success of our students, at all levels.”

In fact, that driving force led to the addition of programs for undergraduates and the funding of

numerous graduate assistantships, Willard added.

“It is fitting to establish this endowed scholarship in Dr. Hopper's name, to ensure student success well into the future,” Willard added.

Those interested in contributing to the Dr. George Hopper Student Development Fund for Excellence should contact Will Staggars at 662.325.2837 or by email at wstaggars@foundation.msstate.edu.