

# A SIX-DECADE PERSPECTIVE ON "THE PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY"

Key innovator shapes department and college

BY MEG HENDERSON

**S**IXTY YEARS AGO, WILLIAM R. "BILL" FOX stepped onto the campus of Mississippi State University as a newly hired assistant professor in the agricultural engineering department. During his impressive four-decade career at MSU, Fox not only witnessed many changes university-wide but also played key roles in advancements within his own department and college.

In 1954, Fox enrolled in the College of Agriculture at the University of Tennessee. Attending on a scholarship from Alcoa, an aluminum company, he chose agricultural engineering as a major. He assisted in the lab as undergraduate student worker, and his professor encouraged him to enroll in the graduate program and assist with designing solar powered chicken houses, a project that was decades ahead of its time. In 1960, he and his wife, Mary, also a Sevier County native, moved to Iowa State University so Fox could pursue his doctorate. Two years later, he accepted a faculty position in the agricultural engineering department at Mississippi State, and he and his wife have remained in Starkville since.

"When I arrived on campus, I discovered excellent facilities, progressive administrative leadership, competent

faculty and staff, and outstanding students, who were always curious, intelligent, and hardworking," Fox recalled.

During his first years, enrollment in agricultural engineering was declining both at MSU and at other universities around the country. The department, founded in 1905 by Jesse W. Fox (no relation), needed a new focus. Fox and his colleagues began to explore these challenges and propose solutions.

"We discovered that the major was tied to industry rather than an academic discipline, and we proposed biological engineering as an appropriate independent discipline that also could serve as preparation for medical school," he said.

Fox thus led the task of creating the nation's first biological engineering curriculum accredited by the Engineering Council. During his tenure as department head from 1967-1989, every biological engineering graduate who applied to medical school was accepted, a point of pride for Fox.

"We increased student enrollment and diversity in our department during those years, and I attribute that to an inclusive and dedicated faculty who recognized the talented students who were available to us," he said.

In addition to charting unfamiliar territory in his academic department, Fox also played an integral role in founding MSU's chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta, the honor society of agriculture, in 1964. Three years later, he served as chapter president.

In 1989, he was invited to serve as dean of the then College of Agriculture and Home Economics. The following year, Fox and his colleagues formed the School of Human Sciences and renamed the college to the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

"We believed that the new school and name better reflected the college's mission and role at the university," Fox said. "As a result of these changes, including establishing the CALS internship program, the college increased enrollment, and job placement for graduates was near 100 percent."

Since retirement, the professor and dean emeritus has remained active in his home department and in the university community. His post-career honors include being named a fellow of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers (ASAE), being selected for the ASAE/Mississippi Section's Distinguished Service Award, and receiving the 2010 Brahm and Sudha Verma

Dr. William "Bill" Fox (photo by David Ammon)



Lifetime Visionary Award from the Institute of Biological Engineering.

In 2007, Dr. Vance Watson, then vice president of the MSU Division of Agriculture, Forestry, and Veterinary Medicine, established the William R. and Mary Fox Endowed Scholarship through the MSU Foundation. The scholarship honors Dr. Fox's many years of dedicated service and is open to CALS students who meet financial, academic, and leadership requirements. That same year, the William R. Fox student lounge was dedicated in the newly constructed Agricultural and Biological Engineering building. In 2017, he was invited to be the keynote

speaker at the university's Extension annual conference.

"It's a privilege to be welcomed back to the department and college on a regular basis," he said. "I've been invited to visit with colleagues and to speak at various meetings and share my experiences with students and faculty."

From his years of experience, Fox has gained valuable insights leading him to write a set of aphorisms he calls "Fox's Laws." The laws shared with his students from days past are still relevant today: "Always keep your moral compass centered on the truth, and do the right things the right way. Expect every

day to be a full day, and give a full day's work for a full day's pay. Have a contingency plan. Be inquisitive and creative with your critical thinking. And be faithful and loyal in your personal and professional relationships."

Looking back on his four decades of service and six decades of presence, Fox reflected on how he saw the university fully realize its time-honored mission.

"During this time, MSU became a place of opportunity for every person, regardless of gender, social status, or national origin, to have an opportunity to excel," he said. "It has truly become 'The People's University.'" 