

Technical Agriculture Education in Curtis, Nebraska

In 1911 the Nebraska Legislature passed a bill to establish a Nebraska School of Agriculture in the western half of the state. It would serve as a boarding school for students from rural areas or towns without a high school.

Residents of Frontier County and Curtis campaigned fervently for the new school, highlighting the town's ideal location near the geographic center of the southwest quadrant of the state. Residents noted that Curtis was situated along the Burlington Highline route.

To support their case, Curtis residents pledged to donate and purchase almost 470 acres of land for the school. A total of \$29,733.04 was raised.¹ On May 31, despite applications from 11 other communities, including Alma, Bartley, Broken Bow, Cambridge, Culbertson, Holdrege, McCook, Mascot, Minden, North Platte, and Oxford, Curtis was announced the winner. The *Curtis Enterprise* recorded the celebration:

“Whistles blew, bells rang, and the people shouted. By the light of a magnificent bonfire which had been constructed in the middle of the square, the Lake City Band played for an hour or more. Giant fire crackers and the shooting of anvils could be heard far and wide. The spectacle took on the appearance of an early Fourth of July celebration.”²

In November the State Board of Public Lands and Buildings travelled to Curtis to select the site for Agriculture Hall, a three-story structure with stone trimmings and columns that was to be the main building for the school.

As construction of Ag Hall neared completion in the spring of 1912, other preparations were also underway, including construction of a laboratory building and a residence for the school's first superintendent, Professor Cyrus Williams of the University of Nebraska. To recruit students, ads were placed in periodicals throughout the state. Tuition was free except for some minimal laboratory fees and a summer matriculation fee of \$5.00. Since no dormitories yet existed, room and board was offered for \$4.00 a week in the “best homes in Curtis.”

To be admitted, students had to be at least 14 years of age and have completed the eighth grade. Well qualified faculty were to teach all the essential high school topics. Students who finished all four years were offered direct admission to the university in Lincoln “without examination”; however, the school's first catalog (published in 1913) made it clear that NSA was intended not as a preparatory school, but as a terminal technical school for men and women interested in agriculture and home economics.

Faculty made necessary preparations for the students' well-being. For parents, they promised to strictly supervise students' social lives. Friday and Saturday evenings were reserved for social events. Activities that first year included literary societies, chorus, band, orchestra, and athletics (football, basketball, and

¹ Horace C. Crandall and Donald E. Ringstmeyer, “Establishment of the Nebraska School of Agriculture in Curtis, 1911 – 1913,” *Nebraska History* 61, no. 3 (1980), 336 – 354.

² Qtd. in Crandall and Ringstmeyer, 340.

baseball). Established in later years were additional clubs in dramatics, debate, journalism, crops, soils, and stock judging.

The school's official dedication was set for August 15, 1913. The Burlington Highline added special trains in anticipation for the ceremony. Those in attendance enjoyed speeches, a baseball game, a free barbecue, and boating on Mill Park Lake.

By the time classes started less than a month later on September 9, 82 students had enrolled. Meanwhile, Curtis High School closed its doors. Of those 82 first students, 55 listed Curtis as their hometown. Among out-of-town students, nearly all hailed from nine nearby communities, with three students coming further away from Stapleton and Hemingford and Wiggins, Colo.

Students that first year helped start the school's purebred Holstein and Shorthorn herds—an important task, since proceeds from the sale of surplus dairy products were to be used to help fund the school.

Campus growth

In the next five years, many long-term foundations were put into place. Construction was completed on two barns, a woodworking shop and a gymnasium.³ High scholastic standards were set by C. K. Morse, who served as the school's third superintendent from 1919 to 1933.⁴

In 1928, while the twenties were still "roaring," the school broke ground on a girls' dormitory that was completed the next year. During the Great Depression, the school added a motors laboratory (1930), a heating plant (1938), a grain elevator (1939), and a butcher laboratory (1939). A second dormitory for boys costing \$85,000 was completed in 1942. A new wing was added to the girls' dormitory for \$135,000 in 1950. The school also built and remodeled several homes for faculty between 1940 and 1950. In the 1940s, an electrical system was installed, the laundry room was modernized, and an acoustic ceiling was placed in the gym. A Quonset building also was erected for storage.⁵

The school reached its peak enrollment after World War II, tallying 415 students during the 1946- 1947 academic year. Also in 1946 the school's name was changed from NSA to the University of Nebraska School of Agriculture (UNSA).

The school ended its normal training program for teachers in 1952, and enrollment fell throughout the 1950s and 1960s, dropping as low as 200 students in 1959-1960. By now, most Nebraska communities had well-established high schools of their own. Residential schools like UNSA were dwindling. Opposition to the school was beginning to mount from skeptics who said the state was essentially financing a live-in high school for one town.⁶

³ Edith Douthit, "History of the Nebraska School of Agriculture," File "History of School," NCTA Alumni Room, Curtis, Nebraska, 5.

⁴ Elvin F. Frolik and Ralston J. Graham, *The University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Agriculture: The First Century*, Part VII: Schools, University of Nebraska Board of Regents, 1987. p. 366.

⁵ Douthit, 6.

⁶ Frolik and Graham, 366.

The college begins

Horace C. Crandall, a former NSA instructor and superintendent from 1961 to 1963, became a senator in the Nebraska Legislature representing the 46th district. Crandall consulted with Elvin Frolik, dean of the University of Nebraska College of Agriculture and Sen. Stan Matzke, among others, and developed a plan to convert the school at Curtis to a technical post-secondary school of agriculture.

On April 6, 1965, Crandall and three other senators, including former NSA graduate Sen. George C. Gerdes of Alliance, introduced Resolution 33 “to set up courses of study related to agriculture on a post high school level but not to be considered as college grade at the UNSA at Curtis and that high school courses at such school be discontinued after June 30, 1968.”⁷

The resolution sailed through the Legislature unanimously. The new college was to be called the University of Nebraska School of Technical Agriculture (UNSTA). Stan Matzke, Jr., of Milford was named the first superintendent. Matzke serve all three years of the institution’s transition from high school to college.

The last UNSA high school students were forced to share the campus with college students from 1965 to 1968. The school set out to be an excellent post-secondary institution under the guidance of Matzke and Gerald “Jerry” Huntwork, an instructor and assistant to the superintendent. The college started with UNSA’s 420-acre farm, many buildings, livestock and equipment, 31 students, four instructors, 12 staff, and no formal state appropriation. Matzke leveraged funds shared by high school superintendent Bob Crosier to match federal vocational technical funding.

Since most college students were from busy family farms and ranches, classes did not begin until October 6, 1965. Gov. Frank Morrison was the keynote speaker at the dedication on Nov. 8, 1965. Morrison had taught history at NSA his first year out of law school in 1931. The dedication drew 450 guests and featured the first 31 tech school students. Programs were established in Agricultural Drafting, Surveying and Soil Science, and Agricultural Machinery Mechanics. Drafting instructors were Gary Parker, department head, and Wayne Heathers; Ag machinery instructors were Burgason, department head, and James Cerny. Ron Ward and Jerry Huntwork also taught classes.

By the time the fall of the 1966 came around, the school had constructed a greenhouse to accommodate the new Commercial Horticulture program headed by John Williams. The college had also added Agricultural Business Technology with Paul Evans, department head, and Bernard Stanley, instructor. Enrollment at UNSTA more than doubled to 71 students.

The school annual for 1965-67 said the first 20 graduates of UNSTA “deserve special recognition for their efforts as pioneers of the new school.” The inaugural commencement at the school auditorium on June 9, 1967, drew 400 people, and featured Dr. Donald Clifton, associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska, presenting the keynote address.

⁷ Frolik and Graham, 367

In October, 1967, in its third year, the college opened with 123 students and five academic departments. Rick Pallas was department head of the new Production Agriculture Technology that drew 32 students in its first year. Robert Todd and Vaughn Domeier joined the team as PA instructors.

Veterinary Technology comes to UNSTA

By the end of the 1967-68 school year, Matzke was offered the position of assistant director of resident instruction with the University's College of Agriculture and Home Economics in Lincoln. However, he did not leave Curtis until well establishing a sixth department to the UNSTA curriculum in Veterinary Technology. In the three years of Matzke's leadership, a high school had been transformed into a technical agriculture college.

In June, 1968, 55 years after opening in Curtis as the Nebraska School of Agriculture, and graduating more than 3,000 students, the high school was closing. The new Medicine Valley High School would open that fall for Curtis students. Bill Siminoe, a principal and vocational agriculture instructor at Holbrook High School, became UNSTA's second superintendent on July 1, 1968.

When college resumed that fall of '68, the old dairy barn had been fully converted into classrooms, laboratories, and exam and procedure rooms with locker rooms for women and men. The program was initiated by the Nebraska Veterinary Medical Association and developed under the leadership of Dr. Walter Long, a veterinarian who came from private practice in Burwell.

Superintendent Siminoe reported fall enrollment was up to 190 students and "dormitories are filled to capacity." Dr. Everett Stencil and Dr. Long continued to build the Vet Tech program and recruit students throughout the country. UNSTA became one of only two programs in the United States to offer a degree in veterinary technology. In 1973, the program became the first to be accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Matzke reported that one of the key components to technical training at UNSTA was requiring work experience for each freshman student. They attended classes the first quarter from October to December then left campus for the next quarter for work experience in their area of interest.

Partnerships and advisory councils of professional industries was another factor in the college's initial success, said Huntwork. The drafting and surveying department initiated an input meeting in 1966 with engineers, contractors and agencies to form the Industrial Consultants Advisory Committee. Likewise, the ag machinery mechanics department relied on support from implement dealers and manufacturers.

By the 1970s, UNSTA was fully established in academics, athletics and student groups including student senate, rodeo club, drama, band, residence hall advisory board, and Young Farmers and Ranchers. A UNSA Alumni office opened in 1970.

The college chartered a chapter of Phi Theta Kappa honor society for two-year colleges on May 9, 1984. In 1986 the campus became a member of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum.

An uncertain future

As the United States dealt with a farm economic crisis in the 1980s, UNSTA also faced a crisis. In 1985, University of Nebraska President Ronald Roskens suggested closing the campus to help meet a 3 percent budget cut being considered by the State Legislature.⁸ The town and agriculture industry rallied around the college and the Board of Regents and Legislature kept the school open. However, state appropriations were reduced two years later (1987) when Governor Kay Orr vetoed over \$2 million in funding as part of a \$20.5 million spending cut. The veto eliminated all but \$500,000 of the school's \$1.3 million funding each year for 1987–1988 and 1988–1989, leaving the school with just enough money to graduate the students currently working on two-year degrees.⁹

The Board of Regents subsequently approved a resolution offering to sell the campus to Mid-Plains Community College.¹⁰ Responding to public pressure and a task force study, Governor Orr re-evaluated the proposal to close UNSTA. On a trip to Curtis in 1987, she promised to “explore and examine every possibility” to keep the school open.¹¹ In November, just months after vetoing the school's funding, the Governor announced plans to seek a \$350,000 deficit appropriation for the rest of the 1987–1988 fiscal year and \$1.4 million to fund the following fiscal year (1988–1989). She also pledged to recommend program and curriculum changes for the school.¹²

Support for UNSTA mounted throughout the state. A 1987 *Omaha World-Herald* poll of 700 registered voters showed two-thirds of Nebraskans approving of the decision to keep the school open. Among farmers and ranchers, three-fourths approved.¹³ In addition, a survey of farmers and agriculture employers authorized by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture found that 38 percent of those surveyed had hired at least one graduate from the school in Curtis.¹⁴

In April 1988, the Nebraska Legislature approved LB 1042, which, in addition to providing the requested funding, also appropriated \$80,000 (the amount collected from the state's sales taxes on tickets to the 1987 Farm Aid III concert in Lincoln) to create a scholarship fund for future UNSTA students.¹⁵

A college resurrected

Superintendent Bill Siminoe led the school's “resurrection.” The new beginning was especially difficult because no students were allowed to enroll during the 1987–1988 academic year. Among the suggested curriculum changes was a proposal to create a new business and management technology program. UNSTA did not have a graduating class of 1989, many of the faculty left to seek other jobs, and the rebuilding phase began.

⁸ Tom Allan, “Town of Curtis Scrambles to Save Ag School,” *Omaha World-Herald*, October 31, 1985.

⁹ Henry J. Cordes, “\$20 Million in Spending Vetoed,” *Omaha World-Herald*, May 29, 1987.

¹⁰ “Deadline Set on Curtis Deal,” *Omaha World-Herald*, June 21, 1987.

¹¹ Henry J. Cordes, “Gov. Orr Travels to Curtis, Says Answers Hard to Find,” June 27, 1987.

¹² Henry J. Cordes, “Gov. Orr Proposes ‘New, Revised’ Curtis Ag School,” *Omaha World-Herald*, November 3, 1987.

¹³ “Fund Plan for Curtis School Endorsed by Most in Survey,” *Omaha World-Herald*, December 21, 1987.

¹⁴ Clint Highfill, “Senators Urged to Offer Lifeline for Curtis School,” *Omaha World-Herald*, February 12, 1988.

¹⁵ Henry J. Cordes, “Senators Keep Doors Open at Curtis School,” *Omaha World-Herald*, April 8, 1988.

In February 1994 the University of Nebraska formally adopted UNSTA as the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in Curtis. Siminoe (now associate dean) retired the next year after 27 years of service to the school.¹⁶ He and his wife Elaine retired to Kearney.

Don Woodburn became NCTA's dean in 1995 and served until 2004. In 1997, Jerry Huntwork retired from NCTA after 32 years of leaderships for students and staff of the institution. Jerry and his wife, Arlan, remain residents of Curtis where Jerry serves as the Frontier County zoning administrator.

In 2000 the college completed a nearly 50,000-square-foot Everett Stencil Livestock Teaching Center named after the veterinarian who helped lead the fight to keep the college open in the 1980s. The new building on the east side of campus included classrooms and offices as well as a livestock handling facility and large indoor arena.

Dean Woodburn spearheaded other projects on campus during his tenure. Also in 2000, the former conservation building and now Learning Resource Center (library and computer lab) was remodeled. Indoor livestock working facilities at the Red Barn were completed in 2001 with the installation of two hydraulic squeeze chutes. Also in 2001, a new elevator was installed in Ag Hall.

The year 2002 saw an equine barn with stalls and runs completed, located east of the Vet Tech complex. Also in 2002, Dr. Richard Thomas, a history professor at Cornell College, commended the historic preservation efforts at NCTA for maintaining much of the original NSA campus, one of the few remaining residential high schools campus facilities, if not the last, in the nation.

An alumni room dedicated to all eras of the school – from NSA and UNSA, to UNSTA and NCTA – was moved into the ground floor of Ag Hall in 2003. Don Woodburn left NCTA in 2004 after nine years as dean. Longtime faculty member Jerry Sundquist was named interim dean. In 2005, NCTA added Associate of Science degrees to the four program areas, in addition to the existing Associate of Applied Science degrees.

In 2005, NSA 1936 alumna Jean Sullivan Rawson gave a \$3.5 million gift to the University of Nebraska Foundation for NCTA scholarships. In 2006, the Andy Knepp Calving Shed was dedicated in Aggie Land, honoring Andy's 50 years as the UNSA/UNSTA/NCTA farm manager. Also, in 2006, Jerry Sundquist retired in Curtis and continued to be quite active with the Alumni Association, maintaining its records and database as secretary.

A new era, campus expansion

The Board of Regents hired Weldon Sleight of Utah State University to lead the college. Dean Sleight brought an entrepreneurial emphasis to the school and set out to help solve the crisis of Nebraska's dying rural towns by preparing young people to be leaders and entrepreneurs in agriculture. Under Sleight, the college developed its unique 100 Beef Cow Ownership and 100 Acre Programs as well as the Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots Program. These initiatives help young graduates to gain low-interest

¹⁶ Tom Allan, "'Satisfied' Savior of Agriculture College Retiring," *Omaha World-Herald*, January 23, 1995.

loans and partner with an established producer so they can return to their home towns as partners rather than hired hands.

Sleight's second mission was to increase the student population through new programs and facilities. NCTA added concurrent enrollment or "dual credit" programming in 2007, which helped boost the fall enrollment to 327 students. Del Van Der Werff retired after 30 years as a popular instructor and coach. He and his wife, Beverly, who also had been an UNSTA/NCTA staff member, reside in Curtis.

A capital campaign was launched to raise money for new dorms and a new recreation area. A generous donation from NSA alumnus George Garlick to build a Curtis Community Center allowed the old gymnasium on campus to be converted into a Student Activity Center. Sleight also led the college through a \$1 million fundraising campaign with the University Foundation to receive an \$8.7 million dollar construction grant from the State Legislature. NCTA had to raise \$1 million in matching, private donations by Dec. 31, 2008.

The goal was met and a public groundbreaking for the Nebraska Agriculture Industry Education Center occurred following graduation on May 6, 2010. That summer, the NCTA welcomed Ronnie Green to campus as the University of Nebraska hired Dr. Green as the NU Vice President and IANR Harlan Vice Chancellor. The campus was busy with multiple construction projects for the next 16 months. In August, 2011, NCTA opened the new 144-bed residence hall built by Dr. Garlick.

On November 18, 2011, industry, community, and university leaders met to dedicate multiple new buildings on campus, including the state-of-the art Education Center with large teaching classrooms, laboratories, computer room, and auditorium. They also dedicated the new Aggie Central Residence Hall, the George and Carol Garlick Aggie West Residence Hall (converted from an assisted living facility), the Dr. Walter Long Veterinary Technology Teaching Hospital, and a new biomass project to heat the campus while burning chips from non-native red cedar trees obtained from the area. Vice Chancellor Green called the event, a "momentous day for agriculture in Nebraska."

Preparations started in 2012 for the institution's centennial to be observed in 2013. Later in 2012, a retirement reception honored Dean Sleight, and Dave Smith who would be retiring as division chairman and faculty member of Agriculture Production Systems (APS) in May, 2013. Associate Dean Scott Mickelsen stepped in as acting dean following Sleight's departure with his wife Pauline to their home in Idaho where they still reside.

The University of Nebraska and NCTA welcomed Dr. Ron Rosati to the campus on July 1, 2013. Having served in leadership posts with Texas A & M University-Kingsville and Alfred State University at New York, Rosati came to Curtis after serving as provost of Southeast Missouri State University at Cape Girardeau. An accomplished administrator, NCTA's Dean has a passion for technical education in agriculture.

In August, over 100 alumni, staff, community guests and friends celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the NSA-UNSA-UNSTA-NCTA institution in educating Nebraskans and others for careers in agriculture. The fall of 2013, NCTA's Vet Tech program was recognized as one of the top 10 large animal programs in

the nation, in large part due to the many species of large animals and livestock accessible for the students, and for the long-standing reputation of the program having continuous accreditation by AVMA for nearly 40 years.

Industry partners, the campus community and statewide advisory groups developed NCTA's Strategic Plan for 2014-2019. The published document was a comprehensive roadmap focusing college initiatives and energies on NCTA's unique strengths.

A new center pivot system donated by Reinke Manufacturing of Deshler, Neb., would be installed in the summer of 2014, as a cornerstone to the new Reinke Irrigation Technician program instituted at NCTA earlier that year.

The college added an equine training management option and agricultural education 2+2 in APS. Fall enrollment of full-time students climbed 6.5 percent from 2013. Within a year of his arrival in Nebraska, vision to reach a broader audience with technical training and workforce readiness led Rosati to spearhead an Urban Agriculture partnership in the Omaha area with the Omaha Home for Boys and Nebraska Extension. The first courses were carpentry and agricultural entrepreneurship, with programming opportunities to grow at the Cooper Farm Urban Agriculture Education Center.

Late in 2014, Nebraska beef cattle producers assisted NCTA in developing a new animal science venture called Heifer Link, which could provide a bred heifer to eligible, second-year students in the 100 Cow Ownership Advantage or livestock management programs. Donors contributed live cattle and financial gifts to add heifers to the NCTA student herd at campus.

Year Fifty in post-secondary technical agriculture

In February, 2015, Dean Ron Rosati announced the selection of Jennifer McConville to serve as the new assistant dean for finance and operations. She had served on the NCTA agribusiness management faculty since 2012, and would continue teaching until May. In this new capacity, she would be responsible for all portions of NCTA budgets, business operations, food service, facilities and campus bookstore.

Nebraska's Legislators viewed NCTA's growth and academic programs favorably in the 2015 session, approving a 19 percent appropriation increase to the 2016-17 biennial budget. Much of the additional \$500,000 in state support allows NCTA to invest in bringing faculty salaries closer to market averages, fund a veterinarian position and to further build on its momentum in serving Nebraska agriculture with academic programs that are meeting workforce needs.

Hank M. Bounds became the University of Nebraska's seventh president in April, 2015, and visited the NCTA campus twice in his first month at the helm. Students and the college community hosted President Bounds, Vice President Ronnie Green and Regent Bob Phares of North Platte with other University leaders for campus tours and a luncheon on April 14, and again for graduation on May 7. Bounds, whose alma mater is a rural high school in Mississippi with the mascot, the Aggies, said he "felt

at home” in The Barn, the former UNSTA gymnasium and now NCTA Student Activities Center of the 102-year-old Aggies of Curtis.

In late May, NCTA established a summer grazing program for its cow-calf herd at a ranch in Garden County in conjunction with the Nature Conservancy of Nebraska. The outdoor classroom is used by NCTA’s range management, equine classes and livestock management programs.

During the summer, campus faculty and staff gathered documentation and drafted criterion reports for its reaffirmation of accreditation occurring in March, 2016. NCTA has been accredited by its national accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission with the North Central Association, since 2003. Periodic evaluation includes extensive program analysis and an HLC team visit to campus.

Another summer project was paving of the large parking lot north of the Education Center, completed just in time for the arrival of students in late August. Aggressive student recruiting, a new “Earn To Learn” student worker program, and dual credit opportunities targeting workforce readiness skills for high school students set enrollment records.

Fall enrollment of full-time students increased by an additional 4.8 percent to 239 students. Momentum builds as job demand by Nebraska agriculture and related industries exceeds available graduates. Currently, nine students are enrolled in NCTA’s agriculture education program and will advance to UNL or other four-year institutions to meet the national demand for agricultural educators.

Today, NCTA students can receive AAS or AS degrees, or certificates in Agribusiness Management, Agriculture Production Systems or Veterinary Technology.

Fifty years of post-secondary education at the Curtis technical agriculture campus was observed on November 13, 2015, with a celebration ceremony and first superintendent, Stan Matzke, delivering the keynote address.

Dean Rosati was joined by in a review of the decades by Elaine Siminoe, Jerry Sundquist, Weldon Sleight and NCTA students.

~ This summary was originally written in 2012 by Eric M. Reed, professor and division chairman of General Education, and expanded in November, 2015, with Mary Crawford, NCTA external relations coordinator. ~