

NCAC-4 Regional Group of Chairs/Heads of Horticulture Departments

The 2020 year in review:

After the 2019 meeting in Knoxville, TN, we planned to meet as a group in 2020 in Gainesville, FL on June 3rd to 5th. However, the in-person meeting was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. A second attempt was made to meet in-person at the annual ASHS conference in Orlando, FL on August 10th to 13th. However, the annual ASHS conference was cancelled due to COVID-19.

We did have three (3) group meetings via ZOOM this year among members of the NCAC-4 group. The first was held on June 9, 2020 and hosted by Frank Louwes (NC State University). The meeting was part of a focus group for leadership in horticulture departments as part of the strategic plan Dr. Louwes was conducting at NC State. A total of 16 chairs/heads participated in the focus group ZOOM meeting. With the help of strategic planning professionals, the group worked through an exercise to get a sense of challenges that individual departments and the horticulture industry as a whole might experience, and how those challenges may impact departmental needs. Future student needs and how to remain relevant and successful were also discussed. Questions were asked of the group assembled that pertained to collaborations, innovative promotion of departments, support for cross disciplinary work, faculty hiring, and increasing diversity. The group thanks Dr. Louwes for these efforts. Notes from the meeting were provided for all in attendance.

The second meeting took place with a smaller group of members on August 11, 2020. It was suggested by Tom Bewick, NIFA National Program Leader, Plants Systems/Production as a way to introduce new NIFA leadership to the group. Those in attendance from NIFA included: Parag Chitnis, Acting Deputy Director NIFA; Mike Fitzner, Acting Deputy Director of IFPS; and Paula Geiger, Budget Director NIFA. The group shared NIFA updates and provided details on the move to Kansas City, MO. They gave an update on programs, staff hiring, and organizational structure. Items discussed included a proposed master calendar of NIFA RFAs, impacts of COVID on current and future grants programs and projects, and impacts of COVID on grant review panels. The meeting was a way to introduce the new NIFA leadership to the chairs/heads of horticulture departments around the country and to work towards better ways to communicate and collaborate. It was a very successful meeting.

The third meeting was a virtual ZOOM meeting of the NCAC-4 members held on December 3, 2020 as a year-in-review. Invitations were also sent to non-NCAC-4 members to increase memberships and participation in future meetings. There were 34 horticulture administrators in attendance. Each was asked to give updates and news from their universities and briefly discuss experiences under COVID and possible future impacts. Many commented on the resiliency of their faculty to pivot to on-line teaching in the Spring semester. Remote/on-line teaching continued during the Summer and Fall terms at most institutions. Enrollment for most

horticultural programs appears flat, with slight decreases reported for some universities. All reported greater decreases in graduate student enrollments, likely related to restrictions on international student travel. Budget cuts were reported for the majority of departments. Some universities shut down for weeks, while others continued with research activities. Extension was impacted the greatest, as was travel for faculty. Long-term impacts were harder to predict. Staff, and most faculty, continued working from home for most of 2020. All in attendance lamented that virtual meetings will likely continue for many months into 2021. All-in-all, the unit leaders admitted many struggles with COVID, but we have survived the best we can.

We tentatively decided that meeting in-person in 2021 was preferred to another virtual meeting. Dean Kopsell offered to host the 2021 meeting in Gainesville, or another FL location. We may have to wait until Fall when a vaccine gets widely distributed to make a final decision on the 2021 meeting.