

Give John Lancaster another 25 years on the job, and the University of Oklahoma just might run out of new challenges for him.

Lancaster, a Mississippi-born biologist, marks his 25th anniversary at OU this year—his “quinquennial,” if you will—leaving a rich and varied trail of scholarly work in his wake. Since beginning his tenure as assistant professor of microbiology in 1964, he has served as director of OU’s medical technology program, assisted in seminars for the College of Liberal Studies, and from 1985-88 held the post of associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Currently, he serves in three paid positions. In addition to a quarter-time appointment as professor of microbiology, Lancaster has worked since March 1987 as director of the statewide Scholar-Leadership Enrichment Program (SLEP), a half-time post funded by the state regents and administered through the University. In July 1988 he began work quarter-time as director of OU’s laboratory animal resources program.

Juggling the directorships provides Lancaster with a ready-made aerobic walking program.

“It keeps me in shape going from one to the other,” he chuckles, his voice carrying a vestige of a deep-South drawl. “They’re located on — well, sometimes it *seems* like opposite ends of campus.” The lab animal resources office is housed in the Botany-Microbiology building east of Van Vleet Oval with animal care facilities in several other buildings; headquarters for the SLEP program can be found farther north in Monnet Hall.

SLEP’s multi-faceted nature sits well with Lancaster. The job sends him prowling through scholarly journals and general interest magazines in search of scholars “who are doing interesting things.” After pinpointing the brightest minds in fields as diverse as criminology, political science and atmospheric chemistry, Lancaster’s challenge is to entice them to direct one of nine one-week seminars scheduled annually for student groups chosen from 21 state colleges and universities.

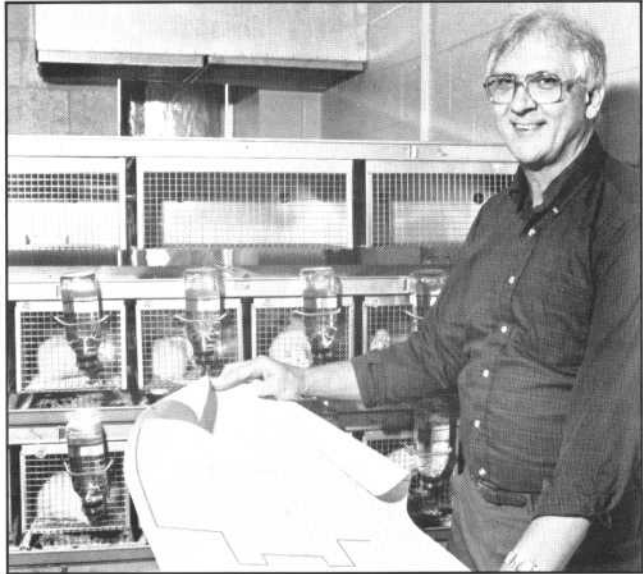
He eagerly recounts the fruits of last year’s search, which netted such scholars for the 1989-90 SLEP series as journalist Robin Wright, a well-known Middle East specialist, and atmospheric chemist Ralph Cicerone. Then, there are the ones he has not been able to snag — yet. He mentions author Eudora Welty.

“Several times we have invited her. She sends us beautiful handwritten letters explaining that she would prefer to spend her remaining time writing instead of teaching. So we check every couple of years to see if she’s changed her mind.”

However, SLEP acceptances far outnumber the demurals. Thanks to past director J. Clayton Feaver’s decade-long success in attracting top scholars for SLEP, Lancaster says, “It doesn’t surprise us much anymore that somebody like a Nobel laureate would be interested in coming.”

Lancaster’s own contributions to SLEP include a plan to base next year’s seminars around a broad, overall theme, “The Future of Humanity: Ethical Concerns for the New Century.” Of the issues to be studied, one will concern the ethical use of natural resources.

It is a subject close to Lancaster’s mind and heart.



*Lancaster views plans for a proposed animal resources lab.*

Lancaster’s scholarly research centers around ethical questions of using animals in experimental research. He also is confronted almost daily with the issue as director of OU’s lab animal resources program, which in September included between 500 to 750 rats and mice. That population reflects a national trend away from using traditional lab animals, such as rabbits and guinea pigs.

Lancaster speaks briskly and with studied confidence on animal rights, lauding activists who seek to improve the living conditions of animals used in research. Yet he defends the right of scholars to expand the frontiers of knowledge in a way that enhances the ability of humans to live longer and healthier. He believes humans and animals both hold a “universal right” to advance their own kind, and therefore humans have a right to use animals in research “the same way a lion has the right to feed upon an antelope.”

Lancaster adds, “A major difference in humans is we can ask questions—we can take into consideration the comfort of the animals we use. But the fact that we can raise these moral issues doesn’t override, in my mind, that ‘animal’ quality in humans which gives us the same right to species perpetuation any other animal has.”

Educated in Mississippi and Texas, Lancaster displays a special warmth for the novels of William Faulkner. “I found I could understand my own culture so much better by seeing it through his eyes.” Lancaster also cites Mark Twain as a personal favorite and furthermore names three distinguished men of letters—Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill and Aristotle—as his “dream scholars” for a SLEP series.

Lancaster’s diverse labors might best be tied together by the words, “We can ask questions.” Certainly as a professor and SLEP director he helps young minds to do so; as lab animal resources director, he ensures OU’s researchers will have the raw material to do likewise. Embarking upon a new quarter-century at OU, John Lancaster’s tasks remain bonded by his broad commitment to education.