



Smooth Management and Strong Commitment

A Profile of President Jack Colby

By Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

The new president of APPA started out in industry but took to higher education facilities management with passion and pride, creating a career known for a smooth management style and service to the association.

Like many in the profession, Jack K. Colby took a somewhat indirect route into educational facilities management. He holds degrees in mechanical engineering from Virginia Tech (1974) and an MBA in finance from the Fuqua School at Duke University (1983), and is a licensed Professional Engineer in North Carolina. He started out managing industrial construction projects for Daniel International. When the construction industry

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took a downturn in the 1970s, he heard that Duke University was hiring. “I had the good fortune to visit Harry Ebert, who was physical plant director at Duke at that time,” Colby recalled. “His job offer was the starting point of my career in higher education facilities management. It has turned out to be a wonderful choice that I have learned to appreciate over the years.”

In fact, that indirect path is a point of connection with many, if not most, APPA members. “As I talk with people who work with us and migrate toward the facilities management profession, I find that we come from variety of backgrounds—few are from a college degree program in FM,” said Colby.

Colby found that higher education facilities management was a tremendously rewarding career path. That first assignment at Duke, beginning in 1975 as a mechanical utilities engineer and then as manager of engineering and utilities from 1980 to 1987, led to serving as director of physical plant at the University of North Carolina (UNC)-Greensboro from 1987 to 1999. Then in 1999, he moved to his current berth as director of facilities operations at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

Colby first became involved with APPA in 1977 through the Southeast Regional organization. “At the encouragement of Joe Estill and Norm Bedell, I became more involved with the state chapter in North Carolina, as well as the Southeastern APPA region,” he recalled. Being just a “checkbook member” was not Colby’s style. “As happens to many of us, my formal involvement came through a request by SRAPPA Board members that I serve as an APPA committee member and then as a member of the SRAPPA Board.”

How Colby found and became deeply involved with APPA comes back to mentoring, he said: “Facilities managers I was working with knew of and were involved in the association, and said I should go to APPA meetings. I was impressed with the types of programs and services APPA offered.” And involved, supportive APPA mentors played a role as well. “When I left Duke and went to UNC-Greensboro, my boss, Davis Lumpkin, said he wanted me to go to the 1987 APPA annual meeting in New Orleans—that’s the first international meeting I went to. At NC State, Charles Leffler and Kevin MacNaughton have provided tremendous support to allow me to benefit from APPA service and to grow professionally.”

That was the beginning of an illustrious APPA career, in tandem with Colby’s professional career on campus. An APPA member since 1978, Colby has served at the state, regional, and international levels. He acted as the state coordinator for NCAPPA for nine years, hosting three annual meetings.



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Beginning in 1994, Colby served on the SRAPPA Board as vice president at large, vice president for long-range planning, and as a representative to APPA’s Information Services Committee and the Grounds Standards Task Force. In 1998, he received the SRAPPA President’s Award. In 1997 and 1999, he was elected as APPA’s Vice President for Professional Affairs, serving as chair of the Awards and Recognition Committee and a member of the APPA Executive Committee and Board of Directors. In 2000, Colby served as APPA’s representative to the NACUBO Higher Education Awards Council and was elected as APPA Secretary-Treasurer. He served as APPA’s representative to the ACUHO-I/ APPA Facilities Workshop in 2002 and 2003. In 2002, he was recognized for his service to APPA with the Meritorious Service Award. He took office as APPA President in August 2005 at the Orlando Forum.

What Keeps Him Going

For Colby, the best thing about working in facilities management—the aspect that gets him going in the morning and keeps him in the profession—is a deep, always-growing sense of “personal satisfaction that comes with leading an organization of very talented and diverse people, working together toward a common goal of creating the campus environment,” he said.

Ever-new challenges and change also keep Colby feeling good about work: “I have found that the constantly changing set of challenges on a campus provides a work environment that is invigorating and rewarding. No day is the same and every day brings a new set of opportunities,” he said. Nowadays, that is no exaggeration. “On the NC State campus, we are in a tremendous growth mode—we’re in the midst of an \$800-million capital expansion and that creates challenges in terms of growing pains to serve a larger campus. It also creates opportunities for us, in thinking of how we should be configuring the campus to best support the academic mission; incorporate applications of technology in the living environment of our students, and for teaching and learning. Finding out how the facilities organization can participate with the academic community and student affairs to result in the absolutely best environment for students, faculty, and staff is a tremendous challenge.”

The expansion also gives NC State’s facilities management division some useful opportunities to modernize campus systems that otherwise might not have been in the budget. “NC State is a large, dynamic, ever-changing Research-Extensive campus with lots of high-tech activity going on, which is

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always a real challenge for facilities,” Colby said. “Thanks to the expansion, we were able to earmark \$90 million for infrastructure improvements, essentially centralizing facilities to create more reliable systems and better working conditions. The Facilities Division team also achieved major efficiencies by reconfiguring the campus and doing better space planning to bring academic units back together. We’ve reduced costs by unifying and reorganizing offices, classrooms, auditoriums, and laboratories.”

There’s a lesson in that experience for Colby’s colleagues at other campuses: Embrace change rather than fear it, because it just might bring unexpected benefits.

Challenging Times Ahead

Colby sees a variety of challenges affecting the profession of facilities management. “First, the rapidly rising cost of higher education will continue to bring pressure on us to do more with less,” he predicted. “Demands on the facilities manager will increase as we are expected to find new and better ways to provide an increasing range of services. This means that all facilities managers need to keep up with current trends and practices in the industry.”

“Second, the competition to recruit and retain qualified and skilled staff, given an environment of reduced funding, will be critical to the success of the facilities organization. We are people-driven organizations, and quality, service-oriented staff will be the key to the future.”

“Third, facilities professionals must have a seat at the decision-making tables at their institutions—that creates a ‘must win’ situation. The facility manager of today has to be skilled in presenting facilities issues within the framework of institutional governance. This requires that we not only have the credentials and the experience, but that we understand the role that physical assets play in the success of the educational

mission. We must be able to communicate these issues in a meaningful way to diverse groups with differing agendas.”

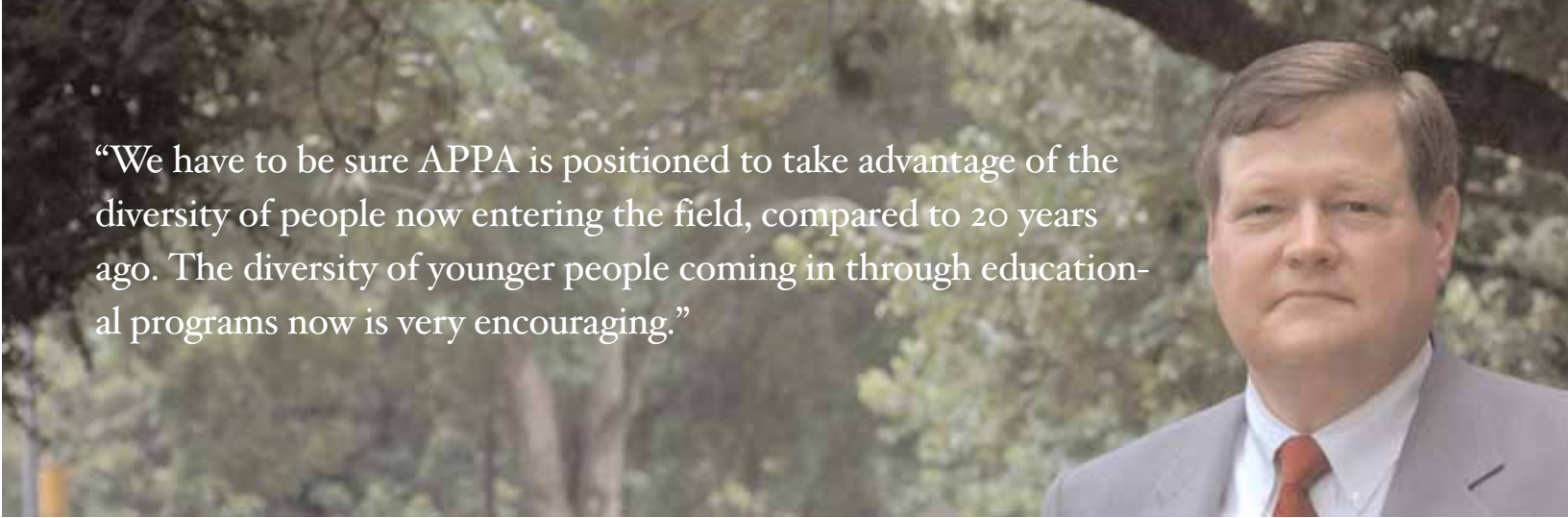
To Colby, professional success is a partnership between facilities and academia, and goes beyond simply providing physical amenities or ensuring that things work properly. “Technology, efficiency, access—it’s not just people in facilities saying ‘here’s what we’ll provide.’ We achieve greater success when there’s an integration of facilities professionals with academics to deliver the educational mission,” he said.

Developing and strengthening such abilities is one way that APPA membership can play a strong role in the professional success of individual facilities managers. As Colby exemplifies, APPA offers the tools and training needed to move in this vital direction.

“There is no question that I have received many more benefits from my association with APPA than I have provided,” he said. “The friendships and professional network that I have developed over the years have been invaluable in providing learning opportunities, as well as the ability to benefit from



College of Textiles



“We have to be sure APPA is positioned to take advantage of the diversity of people now entering the field, compared to 20 years ago. The diversity of younger people coming in through educational programs now is very encouraging.”

the experiences of others. APPA's outstanding educational, technical, and leadership programs have provided the basis for my advancement in the profession. It is through these programs that facilities professionals can move from the world of technical issues to the worlds of organizational behavior, leadership, stewardship, employee relations, institutional effectiveness, customer relations, and visionary thinking. These are skills that APPA programs cultivate and that will prepare the facilities managers of tomorrow.”

While APPA is not Colby's only professional affiliation, it is the one that has absorbed the majority of his energy and dedication. “In the facilities management profession, there are certainly many quality organizations that provide benefits to their members,” he said, “but I've always been impressed with the willingness of people in APPA to share information and network—even before networking was a buzzword—to help each other with common issues.”

A certain personal warmth also characterizes APPA for Colby. “I've always felt that newcomers were very welcome at meetings—that there's a closeness and warmth.”

Equally important has been APPA's ability to change with the times and reflect society. “APPA has worked to become more open and more diverse, to appreciate the fact that new people are coming into the profession, and that we need to welcome them and offer them the same opportunities,” Colby said.

The personal aspect of APPA means that it is “not just an international organization, but very much a partnership with our regions and chapters,” Colby added. “Again, that closeness and working relationship is something that really sets us apart. That's a very important value we deliver to members.”

Colby also has been deeply impressed with the range of training and educational resources APPA offers. “That really sets us apart from other professional associations, because the bulk of our activities are educational in nature,” he said. “With other groups, the total involvement in education may only be an annual meeting. We are a standout in training and education.”

With these advantages in mind, Colby does see a few challenges facing APPA. These include:

- Keeping in touch with the grassroots professional needs of our institutions and our members.
- Delivering quality educational programs on current topics, to equip our members with the tools to be successful in their jobs.
- Creating value for our members, so APPA remains their “Association of Choice.”
- Maintaining and improving our status as a major force in addressing the facilities issues facing higher education.
- Developing and cultivating strong relationships with our regions and chapters to meet member needs better.

Colby sees diversity among new members as an opportunity. “We have to be sure APPA is positioned to take advantage of the diversity of people now entering the field, compared to 20 years ago. The diversity of younger people coming in through educational programs now is very encouraging,” he said. “I feel we will provide a stronger program as we continue to encourage and integrate new concepts into our



Colby in the NCSU College of Engineering



NC State's famed brickyard

programs, so members can see diversity as a benefit to them back on campus.”

The Presidential Plan

Colby's plans as APPA President are straightforward and are grounded in his long-time belief in the inherent value of the association to its members and its profession. They include:

- To ensure continuity of current APPA initiatives such as the Center for Facilities Research, the Facilities Core Data Survey, and the grassroots membership campaigns.
- To align APPA Board and committee activities with the Strategic Plan to deliver quality education, research, and recognition.
- To review and strengthen our current strategic alliances with our partners in the facilities profession.
- To give our members information to prepare them to deal effectively with “generational differences.”
- To set APPA's course for delivering credentials to new facilities professionals.

Colby plans to undertake those goals through a leadership style honed throughout many years in management positions on campus and in the APPA hierarchy. “I have to say I've learned from both sides—my job and the association,” he said. In his own organization, Colby stresses delegation and providing people with the ability to make decisions at lower levels. Being able to delegate is key to building a strong organization in which every employee or member contributes and feels valued.

“Working in a volunteer organization gives you skills and helps mold your leadership style, since you work with very diverse groups of people with different agendas,” Colby said. “Your role becomes one of facilitator and mediator and moderator, as well as leader. That evolution has certainly helped me as I moved up in APPA but also on campus, in terms of understanding how to work with various groups and develop a style as a facilitator, rather than being more autocratic.”

The Personal Side

As he begins his presidency, APPA's Jack Colby would like members to know that “I consider it to be a tremendous honor to serve the association and members at this level. I will do my best to represent the organization well and our members' interests in the best fashion.”

Colby also wants to see members go beyond the basics of simply joining, and to give as much as they receive, for both their own and the organization's benefit. “I would like colleagues to know that APPA is made up of its members—its strength is its members,” he said. “Being active and participating at whatever level you feel comfortable is key to the success of our profession and organization. With competing demands on people's time, we understand the difficulty in participating, but you are APPA and I hope everyone will look at that in terms of what you can do for the organization, as well as what we do for you.”

Colby also wanted colleagues to know that his APPA career has not occurred in a vacuum—both employer and family have been crucial to his organizational success. “All my participation and my ability to work with APPA have been made possible by the generous sponsorship of my institutions, the encouragement of mentors, the support of a wonderful staff, and the involvement of my family,” he said. All are proud of his new role in APPA and can be expected to continue providing the foundation needed for a successful presidential year. 🏛️



Brenda and Jack Colby, with Past President Phil Cox