

President
Christopher K. Ahoy

EMBODIES INTERNATIONALISM, DIVERSITY, AND QUALITY

by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

Campus photos courtesy of Iowa State University

In an era of increasing global interconnectivity and cultural diversity, who better to lead APPA this year than a member who is international and diverse by his very birth and nature? That would be Christopher K. Ahoy, associate vice president for facilities planning and management at Iowa State University in Ames. Ahoy brings a deep-seated commitment to communicating, quality, and networking to his role as the association's new president.

"The world is getting smaller, and the APPA vision of being global is appropriate," says Ahoy. "We have to embrace the world, and borrow and learn from each other. We have to look at and serve the local, regional, and international levels of our membership and those who wish to join us, and ensure they see us as the 'Association of Choice.'"

A Multicultural Background

Born in West Bengal, India, about 100 miles from Mount Everest, Ahoy is fourth-generation Chinese. Nepalese is his mother tongue and he speaks four East Indian dialects. The oldest of ten children, he is a great-grandson of a

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renowned greenhouse builder who migrated from southern China, via Hong Kong and Singapore, to India during the rule of the British Raj; grandson of a municipal engineer and contractor of record for the first American coeducational high school for the Seventh Day Adventists in Darjeeling, India; and son of a civil engineer.

He grew up in an ethnically diverse community in his small Himalayan hometown of Kalimpong and began school at the tender age of three. "The Irish and German nuns taught me discipline; good, time-honored habits; and ambition," he says. "My education with Nepalese, Bhutia, Lapecha, Sikkimese, Tibetan, Indian, and Anglo-Indian schoolmates gave me an appreciation of diversity and universal religious upbringing"—an ideal springboard for the new APPA President.

Ahoy went from a Catholic convent school to a Lutheran high school in Kalimpong, then to a school in Kurseong for British Army Officer's children in India—a "Harry Potter-like system," he recalls—and then to St. Xavier's College in Calcutta as a physics major. After passing an intensely competitive entrance exam (25,000 to 35,000 prospective students competed for 300 openings that year), he went on to India's first premier engineering college, the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur, Bengal, India.



***Above: 2006-07 APPA President Chris Ahoy receives the ceremonial gavel from outgoing president Jack Colby.
Below: President Ahoy and President-Elect Alan Bigger share a laugh at the APPA banquet in Hawai'i.***

Ahoy's early years were not without difficulty, with challenges on levels that most APPA members have never experienced. Although they may have shared similar financial situations, obtaining most of the funds for their education through grants and scholarships, and colleagues of various backgrounds have battled discrimination, few have seen their loved ones endure conditions faced by the Ahoy family. Many family members were incarcerated for seven years during the India/China border war. Ahoy was only able to continue classes "with restricted access to the outside world and with an assigned Indian government security guard, 24 hours a day." Despite these travails and only a meager stipend, he completed an architectural/engineering degree with honors. Although officially stateless, he received financial-aid offers from institutions in both Canada and the United States, and chose to accept a University of California Regents' Fellowship.

Thanks to a British-subject passport from the British High Commission in Calcutta, India, and a grueling journey to the U.S.—"gifts from Providence," as he calls them still—Ahoy ended up at UC-Berkeley. He received his master's degree in architecture nine months later, completing a thesis on systems analysis applications in architecture. His mentor, Joseph Esherrick, FAIA, brought Ahoy into his firm. "We got along very well, solving architectural problems from a mathematical and



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systems point of view,” Ahoy says. “It was a unique opportunity to form high principles and integrity by mirroring the firm’s four principals: Esherick, Homsey, Dodge, and Davis—a privilege.”

At Gensler and Associates, Ahoy absorbed “a long-lasting lesson” that he applies to his work today, both on campus and in APPA—that “the customer truly has the biggest voice, since the customer ‘foots the bill,’ and any endeavor ultimate-



Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, is among three central campuses on a national architects’ centennial list of great sites.

ly depends on customer satisfaction.” Ahoy is committed to listening to the voice of the customer, whether that is an APPA member or a campus community member. He focuses on bringing “process improvement methodologies to match existing culture... for the organization to embrace 21st-century business practices.”

Moving into Facilities Management

Architecture and engineering do play important roles in building and maintaining campus facilities, of course, but how did someone with such academic training and background end up not just in facilities management, but as leader of the profession’s premier association? The practical necessities of life were the initial catalyst.

“I’m a very good architect and systems person,” says Ahoy. “I looked around, and most of my colleagues were in information technology. I had a wife to support, and I was trying to bring my family to the U.S. from India. I saw an opening at UC-Berkeley. Elmo Morgan, then vice president for physical facilities for the UC system and interim UC-Berkeley assistant vice president for facilities, hired me as an assistant campus architect to be in charge of a maverick group in facilities management, handling projects from \$5,000 to \$25,000.” That is where Ahoy’s career path merged with APPA.

Gaetano Russo, assistant vice chancellor for facilities, opened up many new opportunities for Ahoy at the Berkeley campus, including serving as university architect and assistant director for facilities.

Eventually, though, “I wanted more responsibility and I wanted to see more of the world,” he says. He was able to do both. In 1980, Ahoy accepted a position as system-wide director of facilities planning and construction for the University of Alaska System of Higher Education, working for Sherman Carter, executive vice president for business and finance, who became a good friend and valued colleague. “We managed three universities, 11 community colleges, and 22 experimental stations and extension centers throughout the state of Alaska. I traveled all over Alaska, using all modes of transportation—even mushing on dogsleds.”

That experience was another link in Ahoy’s diversity chain. “I had experiences similar to those of the Aleutian Eskimos,”



Nearing completion is ISU’s Student Success Center, which will highlight academic and athletic achievements and services.

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he says. “They looked like me, and some had also had been interned during World War II, because they looked Japanese.”

Ahoy spent six-and-a-half years in a successful career in Alaska. Then the university offered him early retirement with health benefits. He accepted, and returned to the San Francisco Bay area. Once back in “the lower 48,” Ahoy launched his own business, doing beta software testing for MIT and com-



Built in 1936, the Christian Peterson Fountain consists of a vertical waterspout and a simple reflecting pool.

puterized space accounting for UC-San Francisco. “I had a homegrown computer lab in my basement for seven years.” When his wife was badly hurt in a car accident, a more traditional work life was necessary. “I knew I was best suited for working in an educational setting,” says Ahoy. He accepted a position with the University of Nebraska system, serving in a dual role as assistant vice president for business and finance and as director of facilities, planning, and management.

While in Nebraska, Ahoy became fascinated with the Malcolm Baldrige quality approach, Balanced Scorecard for metrics, and the Lean and Six Sigma philosophies of process improvement. However, he found the large bureaucracy “unbudging” in accepting such new techniques for achieving excellence. Seeking a more flexible and open environment, Ahoy joined Iowa State University in 1997 as associate vice

president for facilities planning and management. After hearing that Iowa State University President Martin Jischke had taken people to Texas Instruments to learn the Baldrige principles, he was happy that he had accepted the position.

APPA and Regional Activities

An APPA member for more than 24 years, Ahoy has been deeply involved in the association at the local, regional, and international levels, and brings to his presidency a lifelong interest in both the international perspective and involvement



Ahoy is proud of Martin Residence Hall, one of two suites buildings on campus.

in other professional associations. He was chair of the MAPPAs education committee from its inception and MAPPAs representative to the APPA education committee from 1999–2003. He continued serving as chair of the education committee after becoming MAPPAs president-elect in 2003. He also has served as the State of Iowa membership representative for two years and as secretary of MAPPAs for two years.

Ahoy was MAPPAs president in 2004, and APPA President-Elect in 2005-06. Ahoy received APPAs Pacesetter Award in 2002 and the 2003 APPA Award for Excellence in Facilities Management for his institution, was a 2004 recipient of the

Beardshear Hall, built in 1900, houses ISU's central administration, including the offices of the president and provost, and the student help center.



APPA Meritorious Service Award, and was honored as an APPA Fellow in 2006. His organization received the State of Iowa's Baldrige-based, top-level Iowa Recognition Performance Excellence (IRPE) award in 2005.

Colleagues have benefited from Ahoy's insights into the value of membership and its role in professionalism over the years through his contributions to the professional and association literature, including a regular column for *CampusFacilities.com News*. His project for APPA's Center for Facilities Research, "Negotiating Win-Win A/E Professional Services Agreements," was summarized in the July/August issue of *Facilities Manager*.

A participant in association programs, as well as a leader, Ahoy is a graduate of the APPA Institute of Facilities Management and APPA's Leadership Academy. He has belonged to

or served the Big 10 and Friends, Big 12, CAPP, and Texas APPA through speaking, writing, and teaching, continually promoting focused interest in facilities planning and management.

Ahoy's professional development service outside APPA includes serving as a judge for the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) for the past three years and as chief judge for 2005–06. He is a certified senior examiner for Iowa Recognition for Performance Excellence (IRPE), which uses the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria, and he has been a certified trainer in the Iowa Manufacturing and Extension Program in Value Stream Mapping and Management since 2003. This year, he was appointed by the director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to the Board of Examiners for the Baldrige award, created by public law in 1987 as the highest level of national recognition for performance excellence that a U.S. organization may receive.

Ahoy also is involved with his local Chamber of Commerce and Rotary and he brought the University of Nebraska recog-

"APPA has given me the world. I've been to about 76 sites, locally, nationally, and internationally, on behalf of ISU and APPA."

nition from ACEC for its quality-based initiatives. He has received other awards too numerous to list.

Common Challenges

For Ahoy, being at Iowa State University has been fulfilling and challenging, and his APPA involvement has been a positive factor in his efforts. In fact, the two responsibilities tend to fuel each other. "In taking the facilities organization here toward becoming a world-class organization, I've had to overcome the 'prophet is not heard in his own land' situation, but APPA has given me the world," he says. "I've been to about 76 sites, locally, nationally, and internationally, on behalf of ISU and APPA, which also is giving visibility to ISU as well as credibility for my ideas and my passion for creating world-class operations."

Ahoy sees himself as good for APPA because "I'm a process person, and we're looking to see how we can align within the association, which is a formal process. One of these strategies is to brand APPA as the association of choice for our profession and to have everyone in APPA support our vision of becoming global partners in learning."

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Ahoy would like to see APPA improve by bringing the local chapters and regions more in alignment with international APPA. "We have to recognize that no one entity is as smart as all of us together," he says. He also would like to create a greater focus on the national scene by collaborating in the areas of education, research, and recognition, with more visibility and credibility throughout the association. To APPA's classic three Cs of desired outcomes, which he considers the building blocks of successful management (Credibility, Competency, and Collaboration), Ahoy has added Communication and Consistency. "We must be consistent and persistent," he says.

As APPA President, Ahoy intends to bring his dedication and passion for quality initiatives to the association's overall mission and efforts. Much as he challenges his colleagues at the university to change the way they look at process, he aims to strengthen the association through principle-centered direction, organizational structure, and imbuing people with purpose and passion. He says whimsically, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

The most recent step toward Ahoy's vision for APPA—ever more inclusive, global, and diverse—is the addition of the new APPA Singapore international section, now in the process



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of being formed, with the National University of Singapore leading the Asia region.

Family remains central to Ahoy's every activity. In fact, he likes to say that "I still send report cards to my mother"—and it isn't really a joke.

"One reason I'm looking forward to serving as APPA's President is that I feel I can meld a variety of different backgrounds and interests into a success for the profession and the association," says Ahoy. "I believe we can become world-class. When you see such a goal, you own it." This truly international president is bound to help put APPA on the professional and international map in exciting new ways. 🏢