

Building APPA's Future

A Profile of President Don Guckert

By Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

APPA's new president, Don Guckert, is a longtime APPA member who brings a combination of corporate and higher education experience to his new role in APPA. He is also a living embodiment of the theme for his APPA presidency, "Embracing Change," as a leader on the faculty and as dean of Planning, Design & Construction for the Institute for Facilities Management, as a contributing writer and editor to several APPA publications, and as a holder of the APPA Fellow distinction.

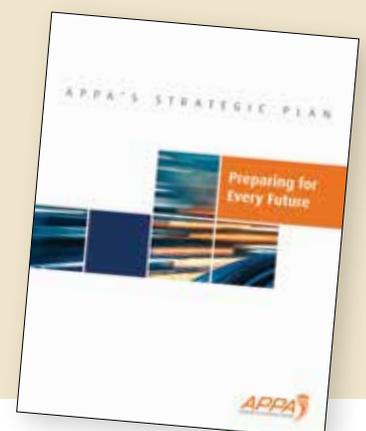
As associate vice president for facilities management at the University of Iowa (UI) in Iowa City, Guckert is leading APPA and its membership through a major self-assessment and realignment that will define more clearly who we are as an association and how APPA can best serve its members and the educational facilities profession.

THINKING AHEAD

For Guckert, dealing with the challenges facing higher education facilities management is central to his role in being APPA's president and updating its strategic plan. He appreciates the support and encouragement of the APPA Board of Directors and valued colleagues in developing and messaging his presidential theme of "Embracing Change." He came to this theme by recognizing the

rapid shifts that are impacting the facilities profession—shifts related to finances, technology, demographics, and communication. "With so many changes dramatically transforming our profession, the future is coming at us fast," says Guckert. "This shortens our planning horizons. Predicting the future has become increasingly challenging in this age of accelerating change. To embrace change is to seek new knowledge and gain the skill sets necessary to adapt to change."

The APPA Board is positioning the association to meet the needs of an uncertain future and thus prepare members for "every future," a focus that Guckert passionately supports. Although futurists may hold differing visions of the future, there is general consensus that in a knowledge economy, being a lifelong learner will be critically important to professional success. As such, continuous learning has become the aligning vision for the development of APPA's new strategic plan. The plan centers around "providing our trademark training and professional development at an elevated scale, in a greater



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Above: The earliest buildings on the University of Iowa campus, including the Old Capitol as its centerpiece. Right: Guckert confers with Joel Smith, groundskeeper II.

variety of delivery channels, through a more robust organizational infrastructure; and on using the APPA community to enhance peer-to-peer collaborative learning.”

“APPA’s strategic vision is to be able to respond to the increasing demand for collaborative learning and offer a wider variety of options. We will respond to ongoing needs that are evolving faster and faster.” That vision is driven by the membership’s desire to know more and do better, says Guckert.

GETTING STARTED

Guckert worked in the corporate sector for several years while it was going through a “couple of economic cycles” that made him decide to find a more stable professional environment. “During the economic downturn in the early 1980s, I left U.S. Steel to go back to school for my graduate degree,” he recalls. After graduating, he went to back to work at U.S. Steel and was laid off a year later due to a plant closing. His next job with an engineering construction firm ended in a similar experience. After being laid off twice, it was time for a change: “I did an assessment of my career and realized that not only was I working in vulnerable industries, I was doing work that was not fulfilling.”

When Guckert was an engineering student at Penn State, he—like most APPA members—never thought about facilities management as a possible career. But he eventually decided that the higher education sector offered the kind of environment he



thought would let him flourish, and entered the profession that would ignite his passion. He and his wife Silvia had met and married in a college town and decided they wanted to live and work in that kind of environment.

Guckert applied for several positions in higher education across the U.S. and landed a job as a construction engineer in Columbia, Missouri, with the University of Missouri System office. Their dream of living in a college-centric town came true, and the Guckerts prepared for a new life in a new town with their two infant daughters, Kristi and Katie. Guckert headed to Columbia as the family stayed behind in Pennsylvania until the

closing on the house they just bought. Everything looked good—until fate presented a major challenge.

“On the first day of work in September of ’86, I was shown the coffee pot and introduced to the director of planning who had just announced he was leaving for another job—and I would soon learn why,” Guckert remembers. “I was then invited along with the rest of the planning, design, and construction staff into a 9 a.m. meeting with the vice president for an important announcement. Barely an hour into my new career in higher education, he was informing the entire staff that the department was being dissolved, and that planning, design, and construction efforts would, in the future, be decentralized and managed by each campus. We were told we all would still have jobs, but they didn’t know at which of the four university system campuses. As a person with all of one hour of experience in higher education, I wondered whether I would be placed anywhere. Imagine Silvia’s reaction when she called me that evening to ask me how my first day went.”

With their planned move and life transition suddenly up in the air, the Guckerts decided to “roll with it” and see how it would shake out. There’s nothing like the unexpected to prepare someone to embrace and adapt to change!

ENTERING EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

As the months unfolded, Guckert had the good fortune to be placed at the University of Missouri’s flagship “Mizzou” campus in Columbia. While that meant he and his family did not have to sell the house they had just bought and move, he did have one more change to make—he was asked to shed his construction engineer role and become a director. That experience ties into his notion of change: “With change comes opportunities that can lead you to good things, growth, and success.”

Guckert’s first major hurdle was to lead the rest of the staff assigned to the Columbia campus through a challenging transition. “I was a very young director, working in a profession that was new to me, and leading a team of individuals to become part of a comprehensive facilities organization,” he says. A driving force behind the decentralization of the management of capital projects was that it would result in better synergy with the facilities operational side of the house. Realizing he needed

Top: Past President Chris Kopach hands over the presidential gavel to Guckert at the Washington annual conference. Right: Guckert and Katie Rossmann, manager of data analytics & commissioning, in UI’s Energy Control Center.

to learn as much as he could about all of facilities management, Guckert took particular notice when a brochure was passed to him about APPA’s Institute for Facilities Management.

Guckert’s career reflects his commitment to embracing change and has resulted in building organizations at two American Association of Universities (AAU) institutions. He has been at UI since 2003, responsible for the facilities management organization and its four major departments: Planning, Design & Construction, Building & Landscape Services, Utilities & Energy Manage-



Photo by Rhonda Hole





Guckert, right, with construction project team members (from left) UI's Dan Cassidy and Kirsta Scranton, and Travis Scott of Miron Construction.

ment, and Business & Financial Services. Guckert was at Mizzou from 1986-2003, where he enjoyed a progressive career leading the department of Planning, Design & Construction and overseeing campus planning, project planning and management, construction management, and in-house design and construction services.

Guckert is proud to have served a long tenure at his two institutions, and to be supported and enabled by the strong organizational leaders and talented individuals within his organization. He has treasured his role in positioning facilities management as a valued institutional partner, and takes personal pride in the noble missions that higher educational institutions serve.

THE FLOOD OF 2008

In a career full of memorable people, events, and accomplishments, one stands out above all for Guckert. In June 2008, he found himself leading a response effort to protect the Iowa campus from the threat of a record flood. Despite 10 days of heroic efforts by his team, construction contractors, suppliers, and community volunteers, the Iowa campus fell victim to a 500-year flood when a 5-ft. wall of water overflowed the upstream U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dam. More than 20 university buildings were damaged, including 25 percent of the

central classrooms, 20 percent of the residence hall beds, and the central steam and power plant; and four major buildings were a total loss. At a price tag of more than \$700 million to respond, recover, and rebuild from the flood, it remains the most costly natural disaster to impact a higher educational institution in U.S. history. Despite the harrowing nature of that epic event, Guckert will always treasure what he learned from it: "It demonstrated in dramatic ways the dedication of our facilities management team and the love and appreciation our faculty, staff, students, and community have for the campus physical environment."

BELONGING TO APPA

For Guckert, one of the best and most-lasting aspects of his time at Mizzou was his introduction to APPA, which led to a lifetime of professional involvement and to his new role as President. "I enjoyed attending the APPA Institute for Facilities Management so much that I've been with the Institute ever since," he says. "It was my gateway into the association and the profession. I realized quickly that, unlike the corporate world, higher education facilities management was a very open profession—open to sharing new ideas, best practices, innovation, and education. It was the APPA community and the opportunity it provided to build professional networks and relationships that I

found so valuable to my career, and to my personal life because of the lifelong friendships I've made."

As Guckert wrote in his election platform statement, "My career-long engagement with APPA has contributed much to my success and, in turn, provided me opportunities to serve, stretch, and give back to our profession." He sees his experience as an Institute dean and faculty member as placing him "at the center of the evolving needs, content, and delivery of professional development for our members."

His wide-ranging APPA involvement and experience testifies to Guckert's passion for learning, service to his profession and colleagues, and ability to adapt to change. Upon graduating from the APPA Institute, he volunteered to serve as a faculty member and in 1998 was invited to serve as dean of the Institute's Planning, Design & Construction track. With Jeri King, he has coauthored articles for *Facilities Manager* (APPA), *Business Officer* (NACUBO), *Planning for Higher Education* (SCUP), and *Construction Specifier* (CSI), and served as the editor of two APPA monographs. He has presented at meetings and conferences of several professional organizations and served on a dozen peer reviews, including several through APPA's Facilities Management Evaluation Program (FMER).

In addition to all the knowledge and advice he has gained from APPA, Guckert has received several awards and recognitions for his contributions to the association: the APPA Fellow distinction, APPA's and CAPPAs' (Central Region of APPA) Meritorious Service Award, two APPA President's Awards, APPA's CFaR Research Award, and two Rex Dillow Awards for Outstanding Article in *Facilities Manager*. His organizations have received six APPA Effective and Innovative Practices Awards as well as APPA's Sustainability Award.

Guckert credits his APPA involvement with helping him gain confidence, strength, and skills; learn more about his profession; stay up-to-date; and advance in his career. "We are a close community in APPA," he says. "It's where we make friends and connections and help each other grow professionally." APPA members also help each other understand how things work on other campuses, which is key to improving one's own campus, says Guckert.

Guckert sees value in APPA membership not only at the individual level, but also the institutional level. "The University of Iowa is very engaged with APPA. We send a lot of our staff to the Institute, MAPPAs [Midwest Region of APPA], and Big Ten and Friends conferences so they can have a similar experience to what I had and bring new ideas and solutions to our campus. Most recently, we hosted two Level I sessions of the Academy on Campus for 70 of our organizational leaders, and we are scheduled for Level II. We believe in what the association has to offer and we benefit from it."

Guckert is also proud of the active APPA engagement of several of his direct reports. Sadie Greiner, UI's director of design and construction, now teaches the core Institute classes in PD&C



Photo by Rhonda Hole

Guckert and APPA President-Elect Ruthann Manlet share a laugh at the recent APPA conference.

that Guckert once taught. Jeri King, UI's assistant director for facilities management and Guckert's long-term strategic planning partner, served as APPA's Vice President for Information and Research and in 2017 was named an APPA Fellow. Lynne Finn, assistant vice president for UI facilities management, is a faculty member teaching in three of the Institute tracks, serves as dean of the Energy & Utilities track, is the current Institute representative on APPA's Professional Development Committee, and is cochair for the revision of the Custodial book in the Operational Guidelines Trilogy. Others in his organization are actively involved in a variety of service efforts. Erin Marsh is MAPPAs' representative on APPA's Membership Committee, and Lou Galante led efforts this past year to establish a state APPA chapter for Iowa (IAAPPA) and serves as its current president.

EMBRACING THE LEADERSHIP ROLE

As Guckert steps up to take APPA's presidential reins, he considers it "humbling and an honor to be trusted to lead an association that serves its members in such an effective and meaningful way."

For Guckert, at the core of any success are a broader understanding of the industry, networking with colleagues, lifelong learning, and anticipating change. "We all have similar challenges, yet are dissimilar in our experiences," he says of APPA members and colleagues in general. "We learn in real time and from each other." He sees APPA as playing a vital role in that learning process, a role that will only increase in value and strength as Guckert leads the organization in "Embracing Change." 

Freelance writer/editor Ruth Thaler-Carter (www.writerruth.com) is based in Rochester, NY and is a long-time contributor to APPA publications.