University of Colorado
President's Teaching Scholars Program
Spring 2003 Retreat Report

CU-Denver Chancellor Georgia Lesh-Laurie

My Passions in Teaching and Research

Shea: We have been talking to the chancellors about revising the call for nominations for the President's Teaching Scholars. And we are starting a practice to invite the chancellors to our retreats. I would like to thank Georgia Lesh-Laurie for being one of my mentors and for being a sensitive leader. She is a biologist and will talk about how her experiences as a teacher and researcher help in her role as chancellor.

Lesh-Laurie: Here I am an administrator. I clearly accepted an offer from the dark side. I have not taught a class for a full semester for seven years. But each day I teach.

When I meet with donors I am teaching them about the university, why we do what we do and in turn I learn from them.

When I meet with the superintendent of the Denver Public Schools, I might be dedicating a "learning landscape" at an elementary school. Those landscapes are designed and built by our landscape architecture students. I explain to the superintendent how our students learn more in the classroom if they are stimulated outside with projects for the community.

I am also teaching when I talk with legislators about statewide issues that affect the university.

In all these cases I use the same skills I developed teaching. I wondered why I didn't miss the great times I had when teaching, because I loved it. But when I meet with all of the people I encounter as chancellor, I must prepare the same as I did for teaching a class. I need to have the subject down cold. That's the same thing you do before you go into the classroom.

My real passion is scholarship, and my research. I have not given that up. I am a developmental biologist. I am worthless in the field; if it is not ground up and in a test tube I can't work with it. But I never met a plant or animal that wants to deny the answers to my questions.
I like to watch students develop the skill to ask questions and to design their questions in such a way they will get answers. In the sciences we have lab meetings every week. Those are marvelous learning experiences for students.

Since I have been at UCD, I have been working with a mechanical engineering professor on fundamental growth processes. Engineers are not good experimentalists. He does all the theory; I design the experiments. For three and a half years, that has worked wonderfully. On Friday mornings, I am in the lab. I ask all the dumb engineering questions and they are tolerant of those questions. That's why I still think of myself as one of us, not one of them.

Shull: How do you get the students to ask those dumb questions?

Lesh-Laurie: I am not sure. One of my students made a significant advancement in our field. I am not sure why he asked those "gee whiz" questions.

Lewis: In regard to educating legislators, I assume almost all of them are college graduates. Do they know too much about higher education or too little?

Lesh-Laurie: My impression is they know too little. They ran for the legislature because they wanted political recognition.

Lewis: Those who are informed, they should know what we do, shouldn't they?

Lesh-Laurie: They know about lots of issues, but I am amazed how naïve they can be about higher ed. Colorado legislators are very reasonable; they care to learn and want to hear from you. In Ohio, they were mean and not open.

VP Burns: Another angle on the Legislature: Are we missing an opportunity to let students know what we really do with our day? They don't understand the myriad of other activities that faculty are involved in. Faculty could take some time to explain to students what we do, so graduates who become legislators are informed in the decision-making process.

Light: I am taken aback because it seems the privates do a better job of helping students to become acquainted with the life of a faculty member. Maybe someone has a great explanation for that.

Shull: Harvard graduate schools have the attitude that they are creating the next generation of leaders. Maybe we should think that way.

Lesh-Laurie: I would also like to comment on the importance I placed on writing in my freshman biology classes. The tough part was getting the writing graded. I wanted them to develop evidence and know what evidence is.