Donald Slack Honored by Mexico's Chapingo Autonomous University

Division of Agriculture, Life and Veterinary Sciences, and Cooperative Extension
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Among photos of center-pivot irrigation systems, snapshots from his travels around the world and various awards, sits a grinning Donald Slack [1]. His office is an ever-growing testament to an inspired life in academia, and in his hands he holds the latest piece to join the collection - a nearly 3-inch-wide gold medallion with none other than his face etched on its surface.

The medal was given to him in July in an elaborate ceremony at Mexico's Chapingo Autonomous University in Texcoco, where he was recognized with an honorary doctorate degree for his significant contributions to Chapingo students. The degree was conferred by the irrigation department and the High University Council.

This is not Slack's first honorary degree. That honor came in 2010 from Thailand's Khon Kaen University, where he was presented with the award by a princess.

"I am very humbled and deeply grateful for this recognition," Slack says. "It's the biggest award I have ever received. It even surpasses the one from Khon Kaen in a sense, even though it wasn't a princess who gave it to me."

An Illustrious Career

Slack began his career as a civil engineer for the city of Los Angeles in 1965, followed by appointments at the University of Kentucky and the University of Minnesota, as well as a brief stint at Khon Kaen University, where he was an adjunct lecturer for what he would later find out was the first graduating class. With a desire to return to the West, he landed at the University of Arizona in 1984.

Those who know him know he wears many hats - professor of agricultural and biosystems engineering, professor of watershed management and eco-hydrology, holder of the Cecil Miller Jr. and Cecil Miller Sr. Families Endowed Chair for Excellence and the Dean's Chair for Excellence in Agriculture and Life Sciences, and faculty fellow in UA Global, just to name a few.

A registered professional engineer, Slack is known globally for his work in on-farm water management practices, irrigation systems and technologies, watershed hydrology, erosion control, and the production of biofuels from sorghum. Having served as a consultant to the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development, his work has taken him to more than 30 countries, from Southeast Asia to South America.

A Personal Connection

His relationship with Chapingo Autonomous University began in 1987, when a graduate...
student from Chapingo's irrigation department enrolled in a doctoral program in what was then the UA Department of Soil and Water Science. His name was Waldo Ojeda Bustamente. Slack would join Bustamente’s Ph.D. committee, from which sprang a lifelong professional friendship.

It was Bustamente who, in 1992, invited Slack to participate in an international course on irrigation systems at Chapingo. He would become a regular instructor of design and management of center-pivot irrigation systems in the course for more than 10 years.

Through that course, Slack met Jose Reyes Sanchez, who, through Slack's encouragement, became the first of the "Chapingueros" to complete a graduate degree in agricultural and biosystems engineering at the UA. Reyes Sanchez would later become president of Chapingo Autonomous University.

A Lasting Impact

For nearly 30 years, Slack has continued to work closely with Chapingo. He helped create graduate programs in agricultural engineering at the university, hosted undergraduate interns from Chapingo at the UA, and participated in a six-month visiting professorship.

Over that time, he has supported more than 30 graduate students who have come to the UA for advanced degrees in various departments, including biosystems engineering, environmental science, hydrology and water resources, and the School of Natural Resources and the Environment.

Building on his partnership with Chapingo, Slack recently spearheaded an initiative establishing two doctoral-level dual-degree programs, one through the School of Natural Resources and the Environment and the other through the Department of Biosystems Engineering.

"With all sincerity, the graduate students from Chapingo who have enrolled in our programs in ABE (agricultural and biosystems engineering) are the very best students that we get from Mexico," said Slack in his acceptance speech.

Fittingly, the first agricultural and biosystems engineering graduate student from Chapingo, Reyes Sanchez, had the honor of presenting the honorary degree from Chapingo Autonomous University beneath a nearly 20-foot banner bearing Slack's name, which Slack jokingly says he plans to hang from the sixth floor of the Shantz building.

"He is a man committed to the human causes of respect and equality without distinction of creed, race, nationality or gender," Reyes Sanchez said at the ceremony. "Dr. Donald C. Slack has shown that he is a citizen of the world."

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