David Westfall
David Westfall, emeritus dean of the College of Science

During my nearly 30 years at the University of Nevada, Reno, I held three jobs: I came to Nevada in 1982 to serve as the first permanent chair of the Department of Pharmacology in the School of Medicine, a position I held for 15 years. The opportunity allowed me to develop and direct the program. My second job was as President Joe Crowley’s vice president of academic affairs, a post I held for five years. Following that I returned to pharmacology until President John Lilley asked me to take on my third job as the first dean of the College of Science, which also included the Mackay School of Earth Sciences and Engineering.

What I have learned at Nevada is that its major strength has always been its dedication to undergraduate education. The University also needed to focus on developing scholarly research, which it has done, and it took many people to accomplish that. Nevada always had pockets of excellence, but it now has spread that excellence across campus. I believe the leadership of President Crowley and his administration played a key factor in this, especially in the careful hiring of first-rate scholars. I remember as a vice president and dean that we almost always attracted our first scholars. We looked at several ideas, fielded the best, and kept working with people. We treated all suggestions with respect. I also learned that I needed good associates to assist me in administering the college.

As for the Davidson Mathematics and Science Center, the vision for a new building started in the 1990s while I was vice president of academic affairs. We badly needed a new building since the last science building was built in 1972. We needed help from the legislature to fund the building, which meant getting the regents and Chancellor Jim Rogers on board. I became involved with the planning process. Eventually the state legislature was amenable and we worked with the Public Works Board to get money allocated. We also needed philanthropic support and the University of Nevada, Reno Foundation was highly involved. President Lilley should be credited because of his friendship and contacts with Bob and Jan Davidson. Ultimately, the Davidsons promised the largest gift in the University’s history, which made the building a reality.

Other groups came forward. We had support from the Mackay Advisory Board as they talked with their peers about the importance of the building. The Nell J. Redfield Foundation helped fund a large auditorium which was not part of the original plan. John Carothers, vice president of development and alumni relations, and his office were integral in getting that funding. What I learned about this entire process is that it takes teamwork.

Ultimately, what I’ve learned over the past 30 years is that Nevada has educated some amazing, talented people who have gone on to do great things. Nevada has maintained its focus on undergraduate education, but we have also become a powerful University in scholarly research. We are very competitive. We continue to attract students from Northern Nevada and California, but we are also recruiting outstanding National Merit Scholars from across the country because of our competitive edge.

Many of the faculty employed here hardly ever leave because it is a great place to work and, despite problems from time to time, a nice place to build a career. Throughout my three decades at Nevada I continued to teach and run my lab so my feet were firmly grounded in faculty life. That helped when making administrative decisions involving faculty because I knew what they experienced. Sometimes I had to make painful decisions, but most times, I gained a better perspective.

From a conversation with Crystal Parrish, director of foundation operations. David Westfall, emeritus dean of the College of Science, retired as the college’s first dean in 2007. During his career at Nevada, he was recognized as a Foundation Professor, Outstanding Researcher and Distinguished Faculty. A student award for academic excellence is named in his honor and is awarded each year to graduating seniors with the highest GPA from each College of Science department. Westfall received his undergraduate degree in biology from Brown University and his masters and Ph.D. in pharmacology from West Virginia University.
Scholar Founding Dean Visionary Team Player Pharmacologist Distinguished Faculty Academic Leader