What is ESF?

The college is building a stronger, more modern image.

by Alix Mitchell

A t the age of 75, the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry is caught in a personality change.

Among environmental scientists and researchers, ESF is known as a venerable elder with a reputation for outstanding research—currently it is involved in more than 200 international research projects. Most recently, ESF researchers have played a major role in the development of the forestry programs at the University of the Andes in Venezuela and in the Philippines. Other faculty members recently completed a program that will allow Burma to better manage its vast teak forests. And three ESF professors have received a $3.5-million grant to support acid rain research. In its own circles, the college's exploits earn international acclaim; last year alone more than 70 scientists from 21 countries visited ESF to learn about its forestry programs.

To those less familiar with the college, however, a photo of ESF students trekking through the Adirondacks on a field trip conjures up visions of "Camp Run-Amuck," says James Heffernan, vice president for student affairs and educational services.

That image is outdated. When the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University opened its doors in September 1911 to an initial class of 52 students, all of whom had transferred from elsewhere in the University, it was dedicated solely to professional forestry.

Over the years, though, the old College of Forestry has grown more and more diverse. Today, its 1,350 students hail from 26 states and 39 foreign countries and enroll in courses in environmental science, resource management, landscape architecture, engineering, chemistry, and life sciences, as well as forestry training. In 1972, its name was changed to the College of Environmental Science and Forestry, to reflect the diversity of its academic offerings.

That name change, however, was not enough to cement the college's new personality in the minds of the general public. ESF also had to contend with the fact that it was overshadowed by its giant neighbor to the north—Syracuse University. To begin with, although it has always been a state college, ESF's first home was on the SU campus, in the basement of Lyman Hall. While it later moved to its own campus just north of Archbold Stadium, ESF did not build dormitories or dining halls. Its students live and eat at SU. In addition, students of one institution may take courses at the other. ESF students earn joint degrees and become alumni of both.

These arrangements benefit both ESF and SU, but they have blurred ESF's identity. While almost any Syracusan can give directions to SU, few are able to guide a visitor to the ESF campus, hidden in the shadow of the Carrier Dome.

"We're better known in Japan," Heffernan bemoans, "than we are in Syracuse."

All of this is changing.

In the year of its 75th anniversary, ESF is determined to educate the public about its diversity and reputation while continuing to improve its already strong research and teaching. Major changes are in the works, ranging from extensive reorganization of the faculty to an ambitious recruitment strategy.

Most of the changes are rooted in the vision of Ross S. Whaley, former director of forest resources economics research for the U.S. Forest Service, who became president of ESF in 1983. Under Whaley, the school has experienced perhaps the largest reorganization in its history.

Before last August, ESF was made up of four schools: Forestry; Landscape Architecture; Environmental and Resource Engineering; and Chemistry, Biology, and Engineering. Now there are none. They have been replaced by eight individual departments, which represent the college's academic programs: paper science and engineering, wood products, forest engineering, chemistry, landscape architecture, environmental studies, environmental and forest biology, and forestry.

"The purpose of the reorganization," Whaley says, "is to streamline the organizational structure and improve internal communications."

It seems to be working.

"The reorganization has dissolved divisions between disciplines, so that departments are sharing ideas for new, joint programs and research," says Doug Allen, professor of environmental and forest biology, who headed a faculty committee that oversaw the reorganization. "This is unprecedented. While we have always had good dialogue among individual faculty members, we have never had joint departmental meetings to plan and design entire programs or projects.

In addition to refining programs, other steps are being taken to maintain high-quality instruction. Whaley is now requiring all teachers to use a new, standardized course evaluation; previously, evaluations were voluntary and no standard one existed. ESF is also conducting a review of its tenure and promotion practices.

"As we hire new teachers," Whaley says, "we will be encouraging them to attend instructional training programs. Some top teaching seminars

ESF's Birthday Party

This year, the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, once known as the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University, will celebrate its 75th anniversary.

The college is celebrating its accomplishments in a variety of ways. It kicked off its diamond anniversary with a convocation in January, and a birthday party is scheduled for July 28. From August 10 to 16, ESF will host the Fourth International Congress of Ecology. The main event will be October 10-11, when ESF will hold a two-day celebration for all alumni, students, faculty, and emeriti faculty. It will feature an open house, forest games, and an anniversary banquet and dinner dance.

The year-long celebration will conclude on December 12 with a convocation focusing on ESF's future. ESF graduates will receive more information about the upcoming events in future issues of ESF '86. They may also call Harrison H. Payne or Elizabeth A. Elkins, co-chairs of the 75th Anniversary Committee, at 315-470-6500.
More recently, state support has improved—between 1983 and 1985, 18 new positions were added. Ironically, though, the college’s enrollment began to drop during this period, as competition for a shrinking number of students increased.

And so, last fall, ESF embarked on an intensified recruitment plan.

"With competition for students as fierce as it is across the country right now," says Dennis Stratton, director of admissions, "anyone who expects to see significant increases in enrollment in any college or university doesn’t understand the extent of the problem. Nevertheless, we expect to stabilize enrollment this fall and to strike moderate increases over the next few years," Stratton and his colleagues expect to accomplish this while maintaining their admitdance standards.

The problem of competing for a shrinking number of students is compounded by another complication: while ESF does award both bachelor’s and master’s degrees, it is exclusively an upper-division and graduate school. This means that undergraduates must do their freshman and sophomore work at another institution, such as SU, and then transfer to ESF as juniors. Some students view this as an inconvenience.

Several years ago, ESF launched the Advanced Early Admittance Program to solve this problem. Aimed at high school students who meet the admittance requirements, it guarantees their acceptance into ESF in their junior year of college, as long as course and grade requirements are met.

There are other programs: campus tours for high school and potential transfer students in the fall, the establishment of student and faculty advisors to counsel prospective junior-year transfer students, and increased efforts to educate teachers and counselors in the high schools and lower-division institutions about ESF’s laboratories, field stations, and faculty research. So far, ESF’s intensified recruitment plan seems to be paying off.

"Although we don’t have all the figures yet," Stratton says, "as early as January we were seeing a marked increase in inquiries."

To a large extent, ESF owes the success of its recruitment efforts to the fact that they have helped to change the public’s impression of the college.

"Most people equate ESF with a Smokey the Bear image," Heffernan says. "They don’t realize that in addition to doing important research on our 27,000 acres of Adirondack land, our students and faculty members also have at their fingertips specialized laboratory equipment, state-of-the-art computers, climate-controlled greenhouses, electron microscopes, one of the nation’s most complete environmental libraries, outstanding design studios, plant and insect growth chambers, a fully equipped photogrammetry facility, and a semicommercial paper mill, to name just some of our resources.

"The training our students receive prepares them to enter a broad range of professions," he adds. In fact, an undergraduate degree from ESF can lead to a career as an urban or regional environmental planner, landscape architect, parks designer, surveyor, forest technician, fish and wildlife biologist, plant and soil scientist, environmental or polymer chemist, biochemist, or toxicologist, among others.

"Our work here is vastly important," Whaley says. "Throughout a good share of Africa, Latin America, and some portions of Asia, you can see problems which stem from the misuse of natural resources. What can be done to help these countries to better manage these resources and provide a higher economic standard? These are issues which our teachers and students are trained to address."

And, while the public may not know it, they are issues that ESF students and teachers have been helping to solve over the past seven decades. When the efforts of Whaley and his colleagues pay off, ESF will receive the recognition it deserves from its hometown and country. It will shed its "Smokey the Bear" image and become as well-known and appreciated in Syracuse and America as it is in Japan.