Land-grant schools turn talk into action: My Word

By Jack Payne

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You might know the land-grant university as your alma mater or the place your kids go to school up Interstate 75. Or the one that could soon be running a clinical trial at Lake Nona. Or even the one that saved the swans of Lake Eola.

Its land-grant identity makes the University of Florida your local university. It gives UF its traditional three-part mission of teaching, research and education with the express purpose of improving people's lives. It's the antithesis of the ivory tower.

Orlando will be the capital of the land-grant movement next week as chancellors and presidents from across the nation convene for their annual meeting.

Most of the nation's leading agricultural-research universities are land-grant institutions. Their contributions enabled the U.S. to feed itself inexpensively by helping the average farmer go from feeding 10.7 people in 1940 to the 155 people he or she feeds today.

That freed up Americans to become the world's leading innovators, making discovery after discovery in medicine, engineering, life sciences and technology. It's helped fuel our rise as an economic superpower.

Finding solutions is one of our organizing principles. We don't just do it in the lab, but we take it to your neighborhoods and to the places you cherish as civic treasures.

Take Dennis Mudge's work, for example. He's a UF/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences county livestock agent in Orlando. He also happens to know a whole lot about toxic plants. So when city officials told him that swans were dying at Lake Eola and that federal investigators couldn't figure out why, he volunteered to take a look.

He discovered the culprit: The swans were eating seeds from the coontie, a type of sago palm they nested in at the lake's shore. Because of Mudge's findings, city crews now simply remove those large seeds each year as part of their regular park maintenance, and the swans were saved.

In Orlando next week, much of the talk will be about high-level ideas. But because we're land-grants, we turn talk into action and translate ideas into service.

For you that could mean everything from offering one of the nation's best higher-ed deals just two hours up the freeway, coming up with cures in our labs at Lake Nona or solving the next case of a vanishing iconic animal in Orlando.

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