Jack Carter

Third BSCS Director (1982-1985)

We'd like to tell you that Jack Carter was some sort of child prodigy whose dream was to become a famous biologist. Well, not exactly.

His road to biology was long and winding. The not-so-stellar high school student (by his own admission) rejected a medical career after driving an ambulance (too messy) and likewise mixed an athletic future (“I couldn’t keep a curve ball over the plate and my football team was 3-and-7”). Somewhat at a loss for a time, Carter ultimately became enthralled with biology labs and field trips while girl-watching on the Emporia State University (ESU) campus (Emporia, Kan.). Not a bad way to enjoy biology.

Carter ended up with a B.S. and M.S. in biological sciences from ESU, a Ph.D. in botany from State University of Iowa, and an impressive list of accomplishments, on his way to becoming the third director of BSCS (1982-1985). The Kansas City native gives most of the credit to his high school science teacher, Arnold Voth, who would chase him down in the gym if his work was incomplete. Voth also gave his young student a battered copy of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

“That really challenged me,” Carter recalled. “I took it to Sunday school at the Baptist church and said, ‘I want to talk about some of these ideas.’” The small-town Kansas minister was shocked—as was another good boy gone bad.

Like a BSCS colleague (see Bentley Glass profile), Carter began his academic career coaching (football and track), along with teaching science, math, and PE, at an Overland Park, Kan., junior high. He soon decided he was not cut out to be a “jock” and that he should “go find real work” that he could truly enjoy.

After serving in the army from 1951 to 1953, he completed his master’s degree and taught biology at the college and university level before learning about a new organization called BSCS. Excited by the “good science,” Carter directed National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded summer institutes on the three versions from 1964 to 1966—long enough to convince him that he wanted to serve as BSCS associate director (1966-1968). He continued to work on a variety of programs throughout the 1960s and 1970s, thoroughly enjoying them all. “I always said that if people are smarter than I am, I ought to shut up and listen.” Carter said. “I found so many people at BSCS where I had to shut up and listen. For a ‘kid’ in his 30s, it was so much fun.”

Nevertheless, Carter had no intentions of ever returning as a staff member, let alone as director. After he left BSCS, he served as editor of *The American Biology Teacher*, took sabbaticals in Thailand and India as a science-education consultant, and chaired the biology department at Colorado College (CC) (1975-1979). “I always wanted BSCS to survive and continue to be an international leader in curriculum development,” he said. “But it seemed to me new leadership was needed to address the future of the new biological sciences and the educational technologies I could see on the horizon.”

The short story is that retiring director Bill Mayer said he would not step
down unless Carter became director. The NSF’s budget had been slashed, leaving BSCS to fend for itself, and the organization’s future was tenuous. The BSCS board decided to sell its building in Louisville, Colo., (near Boulder) and to again negotiate a cost-saving move to a university campus setting.

“Suffering considerable shock,” Carter agreed to lead BSCS for three years, despite the reservations of many early associates who thought the demise of BSCS would follow the path of other curriculum projects that also originated in the 1960s. Encouraged by the BSCS Executive Committee, he contacted Gresham Riley, then CC president, about moving BSCS to the Colorado Springs campus. Much to Carter’s surprise, Riley was receptive, and within 30 days the move had begun.

Only two staff members—Associate Director Joseph D. McInerney and Program Coordinator Catharine Monson—made the trip in 1982. “Because BSCS had been so closely tied to funding by the NSF, it is easy to see why many folks thought these actions by the federal government (to cut educational funding) would spell the end of BSCS,” Carter noted. “Let me reiterate, for BSCS board members and staff members who had constructed their lives and careers around making a difference in the teaching of science in the nation’s schools: closing shop was not an option.”

The new director lost no time in bringing stability to the organization, hiring staff, reducing costs, ensuring that BSCS funds were invested wisely, and submitting proposals for grants from the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, the Apple Computer Foundation, and the Gates Foundation. “It soon became obvious to me that an old truism I recalled from my coaching days was at work among the staff,” Carter recalled. “You can’t outrun a team that runs for joy. The esprit de corps was extremely high.”

By 1983, there was a renewed interest in education in the United States. “More than a dozen reports proposed solutions to problems identified in American education, with science, technology, and mathematics attracting the most attention,” Carter said. “These reports emphasized the declining student performances in science and mathematics and suggested that these factors jeopardize America’s economic prospects for the future.”

In other words, national economic concerns again were driving the engines of reform, as they had in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “The nation’s schools again needed serious help from organizations like BSCS that had access to the leaders in science and science education and had experience in developing and testing modern curriculum materials,” Carter pointed out.

By 1985 it was time for Carter to step down, as agreed. BSCS had, once again, “weathered one of those terrible periods when the national government loses sight of its role in maintaining the quality of K-12 education.” In his final column in the BSCS Newsletter (April 1985), Carter acknowledged BSCS’s successes, as well as remaining frustration about the quality of biology education. “Educated people know that committing to memory the structure and function of the typical flowering plant is of no consequence, unless the evolution of endosperm is related to the evolution of primate. And the role of the grasses in feeding the people of the world is understood,” he wrote.

Carter recognizes that “BSCS is alive and well today because it was always possible for those of us who followed to proudly stand on the shoulders of those who preceded us,” those who believed that BSCS is a unique scientific organization “worth every ounce of our time and energy.”

“It would be impossible to locate a single person who has been touched by BSCS who has not grown intellectually and spiritually as a result of that interaction.”