AGAINST THE ODDS
Overcoming obstacles to pursue his dreams
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[ON THE COVER]

Dexter Smith, a senior in technical systems management, overcame formidable obstacles to attend the University of Illinois, aided by an ACES I Pay It Forward scholarship.

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U of I Extension partners to create first urban food forest in an Illinois public park
Faculty in the College of ACES are extensively involved in international activities—more than half our faculty work in more than 120 countries today. Our distinguished track record of accomplishments around the globe began decades ago with major institution-building projects in India, Pakistan, Honduras, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Brazil. Today the college does significant research, outreach, and academic work in South America, Africa, Central Asia, India, and China, supported by both the public and private sectors. You can learn more about some of that work in this issue of ACES@Illinois.

Recently ACES established the International Food Security at Illinois initiative (IFSI), which is intended to build the country’s most comprehensive university farm-to-fork program for global food security. The challenges are daunting: almost a billion people now suffer from chronic hunger, and in the next 25 years the countries with the greatest concentrations of hungry and malnourished people are expected to have 2 billion more mouths to feed. And these additional demands must be met within the constraints of finite natural resources.

The mission of the University of Illinois and other U.S. land-grant universities to create and disseminate relevant knowledge for the public good has made us remarkable drivers of efforts aimed at eradicating poverty and food insecurity in the developing world. From the 1960s there has been public investment (granted at inconsistent levels) for U.S. universities to engage in these efforts to address global poverty and hunger, often in concert with universities in Africa and Asia.

Recently the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been expanding its work with the country’s universities, promoting research that addresses global development problems and engaging universities in strengthening institutions for research, education, and extension in the developing world. The Feed the Future Innovation Labs and the Higher Education Solutions Network reflect renewed investment in U.S. public research universities as a mechanism for addressing hunger and poverty around the world.

ACES and the University of Illinois have an undeniable capacity to apply to the problem of global food insecurity, and we have put this problem at the top of our priority list for program development in the college, across the campus, in collaboration with other universities, and in partnership with private and public stakeholders. Please let us know if you would like to help.

Robert Hauser, Dean of the College of ACES
No one would say the odds were in his favor. In Dexter Smith’s neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side, his family house was burglarized three times during his childhood. One of his closest friends was murdered during a robbery.

Smith doesn’t deny it was a rough way to grow up. But he also doesn’t make excuses. Looking back at his childhood, he sees a fiercely loving mom who protected her son from the wrong influences. He sees a supportive father, siblings, aunts, and others, all of whom went out of their way to help him reach his primary goal.

“I’ve dreamed about coming to the University of Illinois since I was in the eighth grade,” Smith says. “I loved the whole idea of this campus. From the basketball team to the orange-and-blue colors, it was all I wanted.”

Receiving his acceptance letter was one of the best days of his life. “I never imagined I’d get out of Chicago, let alone come to the University of Illinois,” he says. “I feel blessed to even be here.”

Smith is one of the only men in his family to attend college, so heading to Champaign-Urbana was a big change. He moved into the Florida Avenue Residence Halls with his graduation money—a little over $100—and the laptop gift from his Auntie Bettye.

“I was excited to get away,” he says. “I wanted to do something big with my life. I wanted to put myself in a position where I could help others. It’s hard to do that without an education.”
“It’s a beautiful thing when you help someone who is struggling to turn their life around.”

Making it possible
Despite Smith’s high academic standing—the top 10 percent of his graduating class at CICS Longwood Academy—and the financial assistance he received, college costs were daunting. His mother, a housekeeper at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, took out additional loans and even dipped into her pension to help pay for Dexter’s housing.

“My mom didn’t tell me she did that,” Smith says. “I found out from my sister after I had moved to campus. I had no idea what a pension even was—I looked it up online and realized that I couldn’t let my mom do that.”

He lived frugally, found a job, and moved out of the residence halls to cheaper housing as soon as he could.

As he adjusted to life in college, Smith became more involved in campus activities. He signed up to be a CORE mentor—Creating Opportunities Recognizing Excellence—during his sophomore year.

“I decided the best way to make an impact on my environment was to mentor others,” he says. “I wanted to be a positive role model in their lives—someone they could look up to.”

His mom, Brenda Smith, says she is proud of her son’s commitment to mentor others.

“I think more students need to go out to the streets and encourage kids,” she says. “There are so many troubled kids who need someone to help them on their way and show them how to go the straight and narrow.”

Settling in
Smith found his academic home in the Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering as a technical systems management major.

“I love problem solving and am very interested in computers and mechanics,” he says. “That’s what this major is all about—solving new problems and thinking outside of the box. I felt like this coursework could apply to my life. I didn’t come here to just learn from the books. I want to be able to apply it to my world.”

Once Smith decided on a major, he faced additional fees and began trying to secure financial assistance. He filled out form after form in hopes of finding help to pay for fees and books.

“I’ve been rejected my whole life from scholarships,” he says. “I’ve always been the #2 guy, just short of winning the award. At the end of my sophomore year, Dean [Jason] Emmert encouraged me to apply for ACES scholarships. I was shocked when I received word that I had been awarded an I Pay It Forward Scholarship.”

Smith jokes that he had to read the letter twice because he had never won a scholarship before. This one even had a name. He immediately wanted to learn more about it.

“When Stacey Cole [of the ACES Office of Advancement] called to explain to me what this new scholarship was all about—students helping students—I was overwhelmed,” Smith says.

And his mom was, too.

“This scholarship made it possible for him to keep going to school,” she says. “It had a tremendous impact on his life.”

The $1,000 I Pay It Forward Scholarship came at just the right time for Smith, who was in his junior year and struggling financially. The funds helped him pay for rent and books—both of which he needed to stay in school.

His scholarship was the result of the first-ever student-led philanthropic initiative in the College of ACES. In April 2014, a month-long campaign was launched by the ACES Student Advancement Committee. More than $17,000 was raised through 1,100 donors, over 900 of them current students. The committee decided to use the funds to create 17 $1,000 scholarships.

Earning recognition
Stacey Cole, associate director of advancement, says Smith encompasses every single character trait that his peers said they wanted to see in a scholarship recipient.

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“Dexter is in one of the most competitive agricultural and biological engineering programs in the nation—the odds were against him, but he made it. That in itself is a big deal,” Cole says. “He’s a hard worker, a good student, well respected and liked by everyone. He is humble and appreciative. He has dignity and class. He gives everything his all.”

“One day we all have different ways we can pay it forward.”
Cole says the campaign continued in 2015 and broke records once again—$19,000 was raised through some 1,400 donors, more than 90% of them students.

“In ACES, we are a family,” Cole says. “We look out for one another. These scholarships are used for financially at-risk students who tend to fall ‘in the middle’ or for those who have the academic merit but may have to drop out of college due to financial hardship. Our students in ACES weren’t having that. We believe that no one should have to leave college because of money. So we did something about it.”

“Grateful” doesn’t begin to say how Smith feels about being one of the first recipients of this scholarship. “I’m a walking example of the success of this concept,” he says. “If you feel led to do a good deed, you should do it. It changed my life. I hope other students can see the value of their dollar helping another student out.”

Stacey agrees that a major benefit of the student-led campaign is watching students realize that they can make a difference.

“If everyone said their dollar didn’t count [and didn’t give], our numbers would be slim,” she says. “And those who thought one dollar couldn’t possibly help raise nearly $20,000 left campus last spring with a completely different perspective, knowing they were a part of something big. Our students gave from the heart without expecting anything in return.”

**Moving ahead**

Smith is devoted to continuing to give his time during his last year on campus to help with the growth and support of the fund-raising campaign.

“We all have different ways we can pay it forward,” he says. “I believe I’ve started that process by mentoring other students, and I plan to continue to do so. I’ve learned a lot from my experiences in life. I’d rather listen and learn than try the wrong path first. I take a lot of advice from others and pass it on through community service and mentoring. I don’t expect anything back—I just want to make others’ lives better.”

Dexter’s dad, Earnest Merritt, agrees that the I Pay It Forward scholarship helped Smith financially. But Merritt also believes it was a boost to his son’s spirit to know that he was valued by the College of ACES.

“Even without the money, he’s just grateful knowing someone appreciated him,” Merritt says.

Giving matters, Smith says. Whether in finances or time, he encourages others to get started.

“You aren’t doing any service to anyone if you are always receiving and moving forward,” Smith says. “The most important thing about life is that you can’t truly live without helping someone else. It’s a beautiful thing when you help someone who is struggling to turn their life around.”

After graduation, he plans to pursue a career in information technology where he can blend his experiences as a College of Media IT HelpDesk attendant with his degree in technology systems management.

“I hope to find a job that will allow me to give back to the neighborhood where I’m from,” Smith says. “It’s a rough place, and I’m still working through the details, but I’m hopeful I can be fortunate enough to give back and help make things a little better.”

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If you would like to give to the I Pay It Forward campaign, checks can be made payable to the University of Illinois Foundation. You can also give online at advancement.aces.illinois.edu/makegift. Gifts to the University of Illinois are tax deductible. You will receive a gift receipt issued by the University of Illinois Foundation.

If you have any questions, please contact Stacey Cole at smcole@illinois.edu.
Crop sciences students explore agriculture in the Middle East

By Regan Enkes
Photo by Danielle Cooney

It’s common to hear stories of how college students have been impacted by their experiences studying abroad, but it’s rare to hear how the people of the countries they visit are affected. Crop sciences students visited Morocco through the College of ACES study abroad program for the first time last December, and their leader, associate professor in crop sciences Mosbah Kushad, says it likely won’t be the last time.

“The idea with ACES study abroad is to take students overseas to learn about other cultures, and specifically about the agriculture in those countries,” Kushad says. “We’re not going to large cities. We’re looking at farmers and their livelihood and at how they grow and market their crops. My goal is to take students places they would not have gone otherwise.”
Kushad, who speaks Arabic, decided to pursue Morocco as a destination because he was already familiar with the country and because Morocco is fairly unknown to people in the United States.

“I knew the trip would be a good opportunity for students to experience something different, somewhere outside of South America and Europe,” he says. “The Morocco trip turned out to be one of the best trips I’ve ever taken.”

The experience was unique for students because of the challenges that Moroccan farmers face. Their farms are very small, and they have less access to export opportunities than farmers in other countries. These realities mean their production methods and yields differ from what is typical. While in Morocco, students visited farms and markets and got a firsthand taste of the hospitality common in the Middle East.

“One day we were driving and saw an onion farm on the side of the road,” participant Sarah Reising says. “Dr. Kushad told our driver to pull over, and the farmer came out. Dr. Kushad explained that we were a group of students learning about crops and asked if the farmer could tell us about his farm. The farmer was very welcoming and genuine, wanting us to know everything he could tell us about onions. He was intrigued by our questions and answered them to the best of his ability. The best part of the experience was that he told Dr. Kushad, ‘This was the best day of my life, and I will talk about it forever.’”

In addition to their farm visits, the group stopped at the marketplaces in every city they encountered and camped in the desert.

“We rode camels out into the Sahara Desert,” Reising says. “The caravan leaders helped us onto our camels and then led us into the desert, where we camped in nice tents with running water and working restrooms. That night the leaders played drums while we all danced around a fire. It was a one-of-a-kind experience that added more fun and culture to the trip.”

After they returned home, students finished out the course by documenting their reflections. Kushad says the reports were eye-opening to him, with students noting appreciation for many simple things that are easy to take for granted or that they just didn’t know about.

“Morocco is on the fringes of the Middle East, and it doesn’t have the best image in the U.S. That’s based mostly on the actions of a few, but those actions affect everybody,” Kushad says.

“When students went to Morocco they saw what people of the Middle East are about,” he continues. “People are always kind if you go in with an open mind, an open heart, and a smile on your face. To see the students learn that was priceless. The quality of students in ACES is inspiring—their willingness to learn, their enthusiasm for traveling abroad, and their courage to take the first steps to experience something new.”

Crop sciences students learn about production methods every day in class, but studying abroad gives them a whole new appreciation for advancements in technology. Some students, including Reising, even find that studying abroad shapes their career aspirations.

“I always wanted to be an agronomist and help farmers find out what’s wrong with their fields, what we can do to fix it, how we can improve crop yield and so on, but I had never thought about working abroad,” Reising says. “The trip to Morocco got me thinking about the global aspects of crop sciences, and I can see myself working outside of America now.”

Wendy White, the student recruiter in crop sciences, says that studying abroad helps expand students’ horizons regarding career opportunities.

“It can help to broaden their idea of the jobs out there and global career opportunities,” White says. “And having a study abroad trip on a resume shows that a student is willing to go outside of their comfort zone to experience something new. That helps a future employer to see a more well-rounded person.”

Above all else, Reising says, her passion for crop sciences was solidified through the trip to Morocco. She was blown away by the farmers’ dedication to explaining their production methods and by their hospitality and enthusiasm for educating future generations of agriculturalists.

“The trip to Morocco got me thinking about the global aspects of crop sciences, and I can see myself working outside of America now.”

There is an enormous amount of research and technology going into crop sciences, and the world needs to eat,” Reising says. “The trip to Morocco, or really to anywhere, helps students remember why they do what they do.

“We all came to the University of Illinois for a specific reason, but it’s unique to learn firsthand about different crops, like onions, fava beans, and oranges. I think it helps students come back and focus, and it definitely showed me the importance of my impact on crop sciences.”
Passport to Turkmenistan

By Debra Levey Larson

Photo by Stephan Schinning
Allan Mustard's professional goal wasn't to become a U.S. ambassador. But after about a dozen career moves, Mustard is now serving in his first year as Ambassador to Turkmenistan—a country a little larger than California that shares borders with Iran and Afghanistan. He describes his career path not as one with a calculated strategy, but more as a series of encouraging nudges and a stream of opportunities that led to an unexpected outcome.

"I really didn't have anything in mind, except that I wanted to do something internationally," Mustard says. "I studied Russian and German because those were the only foreign languages offered at the community college where I started out. Had they offered Haitian Creole, I might have ended up on a sandy beach in the Caribbean."

Mustard, raised on a dairy farm near Brady, Washington, completed bachelor's degrees at the University of Washington in Slavic languages and literature and political science. That combination opened the door to his first overseas job, as a guide and as an interpreter for the U.S. International Communications Agency at an American exhibit in the Soviet Union in the late '70s. The training took place on the University of Illinois campus.

Then came the first nudge.

"When I got to Moscow, I met Jim Brow, a USDA agricultural attaché," Mustard says. "He said to me, 'Gosh, you're pretty smart, you speak good Russian, and you grew up on a farm. All you're missing is a master's degree in agricultural economics. If you get that, you can come work for us.' So I did."

Mustard received another nudge while at Illinois working on his master's. He was encouraged to take the Foreign Service exam—a test so difficult that only about 1 in 100 people pass it. But Mustard was one of them. As a result of his test score, he accepted an invitation to Chicago for an oral assessment.

The road appeared to be a dead end when the State Department lost his paperwork, so Mustard took a job with USDA. After a month, the State Department called: they'd found the missing papers. They wanted him to take an entry-level course, beginning almost immediately.

"I said I already had a job that would lead to an overseas career as an agricultural attaché. They asked, 'Why would you want to do that?' I explained that the only advantage of coming to State is that I'd be eligible for an ambassadorship, and that would never happen for me. So I stayed with agriculture, specifically because I didn't think that I'd ever have a shot at an ambassadorship."

Over the next couple of decades, Mustard held positions in Istanbul, Vienna, and Mexico City, along with being posted twice each to Washington, DC, and Moscow.

It wasn't until 2009 that Mustard entertained the ambassadorship possibility. "Some of my State colleagues said, 'You really should apply for this,'" Mustard recalls. "It doesn't cost anything and it only takes 45 minutes to fill out the paperwork.' So I did—and here I am."

Without hesitation, Mustard names his Illinois ag econ degree as a key career building block. "I took courses in analysis and marketing from faculty like Hal Everett and Phil Garcia. I studied development under Earl Kellogg and policy with Bob Spitze and Steve Schmidt. Foreign Agricultural Service officers tend to specialize in market development or are oriented toward food aid countries, but I did a bit of everything, and U of I gave me a full array of tools."

Using technology was one of those tools. Mustard's comfort with computer programming at Illinois led to his being "pigeonholed as the data systems geek" at the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS). "Rather than reject the title, I embraced it and split the difference; I did my analytical job, but I also did a fair amount of programming and tutoring."

Years later, when he was a senior foreign service officer in Washington, DC, computer expertise came in handy again, garnering him a position as head of FAS data systems. Each career move presented new opportunities to put into practice what he learned about agricultural economics at Illinois.

Mustard points to one opportunity following the Balkans War of the 1990s as particularly meaningful. He was agricultural counselor in the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, Austria, covering seven countries in Central Europe, including Bosnia. Bosnia's population of about 4.5 million included 2 million war refugees. Many were widows with children, receiving public assistance because their husbands were victims in the war's ethnic cleansing.

Mustard was tasked with leading a food aid effort to Bosnian refugees.

According to Mustard, there is a right way and a wrong way to provide food aid to a country. "We would not just deliver the food that was needed, but we would structure it around a program that would help get at least some Bosnians out of poverty."

Mustard collaborated with 10 private charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). "My goal was to lift a certain number of villages out of poverty and restart their economies," Mustard says.

He struck a deal to divide assistance between the aid organizations' traditional programs and credit programs for the municipalities. The intent was to inject money into the village economies at multiple points—to farmers, to consumers, and to those who sell inputs to farmers—in order to get the economies moving again.
“A year later, it was astounding that we had brought to life 50 moribund municipalities,” Mustard says. “War widows who had been living off of handouts were working again at their private businesses and supporting their families. Meeting those widows was probably the most emotional experience of my life. They were so grateful. And I had done so little—provided some policy direction for the NGOs. The organizations did the heavy lifting—but without guidance, I’m not sure the aid would have had as deep an impact.”

Mustard again mentions his study of economics and development at Illinois with Earl Kellogg. “I was reaching back to my graduate studies to come up with the constructs of how to provide relief and then figure out some way to apply them practically in order to revive the villages’ economy. It all worked.”

Today Mustard faces new challenges as Ambassador to Turkmenistan—which he describes as “one of the most closed societies in the world.” He believes the U.S. embassy can help open a window for Turkmen citizens by offering English language instruction. “We have a library of English books at the embassy,” he says. “The classes are always full, and we have a waiting list of 300. These efforts can have an outsized impact because we’re reaching the people who want to learn English and are self-selecting to become leaders.”

So, how does one become an ambassador? To students interested in international careers, Mustard recommends starting with agriculture. “That is the only sector of the economy that runs a trade surplus. Being an agricultural officer for the FAS is about as good as it gets.” All you need to do, he says, is look at where the growth potential for agriculture lies—and, of course, learn another language or two.

“With 96 percent of the world’s population outside the United States, that’s where the growth is—particularly in Asia,” he says. “If I were to do this all over again, I would probably have studied Chinese rather than Russian, and Spanish instead of German. But that said, I think you can study any foreign language and put it to good use. Think about a career with FAS, and take a shot.”

What’s his next career move? “Right now I’m focused on being successful at this one,” he says.

Allan Mustard (left) is sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan by Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal (far right), using a Bible that belonged to his great-great grandfather. Looking on are (from left) Mustard’s sister, Kate Breckon; his daughter, Fiona; and his wife, Ann.
Hire an ACES student with a double major and you get more than an energetic, enthusiastic U of I grad knowledgeable in two disciplines. You get an employee with excellent time management skills, a leader who has worked with a diverse group of people, an accomplished networker able to find the right person or set of data to solve a tricky problem, and a superb educator who can explain complex scientific information to the average person, says Debra Korte, a teaching associate in agricultural science education.

“Students often have a passion for a specific area of agriculture, and they understand the importance of being able to transfer that message. Combining a degree in a hard science with another degree in teaching or leadership makes for a perfect combination of knowledge and skills,” she adds.

ACES senior Devin Daugherty will graduate with one degree in animal sciences and another in agricultural leadership education. “My high school ag teacher said that an education degree tells an employer you can get up and speak in front of anyone,” she explains.

Daugherty, who works evenings at the U of I’s Large Animal Clinic, isn’t ready to narrow her career prospects, although she’s intrigued with the idea of working at Grant’s Farm in St. Louis, managing the Clydesdale facilities while educating the public about the famous horses’ care, training, and breeding. Last summer she interned at Miller Park Zoo in Bloomington, where she managed and developed programs for the children’s summer camps.

Senior Clay Carley will take five years to obtain degrees in crop sciences and agricultural science education, and he’s minoring in business as well. His focus is plant biotechnology and molecular biology, and he plans to pursue a Ph.D., become a genetic engineer, and go into trade development.

“I’ve had lots of help from my ACES departments in mapping out all the classes I need to accomplish this plan. It’s really challenging, like a giant puzzle, and my advisers have spent at least three 3-hour sessions with me putting all the pieces together,” he says.

The aspiring scientist is a pro at time management, juggling multiple commitments every semester, but when it’s time to focus, Carley knows how to give a project his full attention.

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Interning, taking courses that expand his professional horizons, and networking with industry leaders are all important, he asserts.

“For example, I just returned from a day at Dow AgroSciences’ global headquarters. With the help of my ACES professors, I’m making connections that will be invaluable in the future,” he says.

Senior Morgan Doggett is working on degrees in agricultural leadership education and agricultural and consumer economics with an emphasis in policy, international trade and development. She wants to influence legislation that affects family farmers like her father, and she is excited that her internships have allowed her to meet Illinois Senator Dick Durbin and Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth.

“Because of my two majors, I’ve worked with many kinds of people from varying backgrounds. In ag economics, I’m dealing with facts, figures, numbers, and deadlines, and all of that gives me an analytical base for making decisions. But my education courses are people oriented.

“That’s important because a lobbyist has to be able to further the interests of agriculture with diverse groups of people,” Doggett says.

Students who have combined mastery of a hard science with an education or leadership degree focused on people are very attractive to employers, Korte notes.

“These students have excelled in two disciplines, contributed multiple hours toward jobs during the school year, and interned during the summer, plus they’re often active participants and officers in student organizations. They’re the best of the best,” she says.

By Phyllis Picklesimer
Next spring when Ginnefer (Ginn) Cox faces the crowd and receives a Ph.D. hood, her father won’t be there. But she takes some consolation in knowing she wouldn’t have earned that degree in food science and human nutrition had he not passed away from complications of diabetes and other health issues in 2001.

As Cox arrived at Illinois to start her doctoral work with Dr. Soo Lee in 2010, the Institute of Medicine released recommendations regarding dietary sodium. Because of her family history of high blood pressure, stroke, and diabetes, Cox knew she wanted to explore sodium reduction.

The double whammy

“My personal journey has definitely impacted my professional goals,” Cox says. She grew up learning to cook from her father, who had hypertension in addition to type 2 diabetes and was overweight.

Cox’s dissertation explores factors that impact consumption of fat and sodium through processed foods. Over 50% of the 78 million people in the United States who have hypertension are also overweight or obese, she says. “If you are overweight or obese and trying to battle hypertension, it’s a double whammy,” she says. “You have to lose weight and look at dietary sodium intake at the same time.”

Unfortunately, Cox says, there is no acceptable substitute for salt, as there is for sugar. Dietitians can advise people to cut back, but you cannot completely eliminate salt from your diet.

Cox’s first project in Soo Lee’s lab was a grocery inventory of reduced fat foods in 10 product categories. The findings showed that in some instances, reduced fat and low fat foods had more sodium than their full fat counterparts. The increase in sodium compensates for the product changes.
created by the alteration in fat content. This reality presents a challenge for shoppers who need to moderate both sodium and fat intake.

Taste is king

“I think people want to know more about sodium, but it goes on the back burner when other factors, like fat and carbohydrates, are considered,” Cox says. By completing a survey of over 1,100 consumers, food industry professionals, and health professionals, Cox learned that less than half of those surveyed understood fat and sodium claims on food labels.

Cox decided to explore sodium reduction in an actual food—creamy tomato soup. Processed soup samples were created in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition with varying levels of sodium, fat, and herbs. Panelists reviewed the soup products for overall liking, and another group identified key attributes driving that liking.

Ultimately, the information learned about key attributes, compensation effect, and liking could guide the creation of products with a desirable balance in product features, Cox says. “If you lower fat or sodium too much, overall liking tends to decrease, and people are not going to buy something that doesn’t taste good. A medium ground is best.”

Researcher Soo Lee notes that “when we say taste is king, it is the truth. Taste is still the number one factor for consumers” in choosing what foods to eat.

Chew on this

We consume three types of salty foods, explains Youngsoo Lee, another professor of food science: those with spray-on surface salt, common in crackers or chips; salty liquids, like canned soup; and salty solids, such as cheese and sausage. While Cox is exploring the balance between salt and fat, graduate student Wan-Yuan Kuo is working with Lee, employing her knowledge of food engineering to impact the effects of sodium on human health.

Salt has three key roles. Not only is it a taste enhancer, it helps create texture as a structural forming agent, and it is a preservative, Kuo says. In some instances, it also aids in the fermentation process.

“When we chew food, as little as 5 percent of the salt we consume is perceived,” Kuo says. “Up to 95 percent is digested and absorbed by our bodies without any use in saltiness perception.”

Youngsoo Lee and Kuo have created a whey protein gel in which they can manipulate various structural properties. The gel serves as a model for foods like sausage and cheese. The two scientists hope to enhance sodium release during chewing by altering pore size and distribution throughout the gel. If a change in structure increases saltiness perception, less sodium is necessary to attain consumers’ desired taste. This would reduce the amount of sodium consumed in the same amount of food.

Researchers Y. Lee, S. Lee, and Kuo received a USDA grant for the gel project, and several U.S.-based food companies have expressed interest.

“Food companies are trying very hard. We’re trying to find a clue to help them reduce sodium,” says Youngsoo Lee. He and Kuo are hopeful that they can provide a slight modification to processing methods to achieve a reduction in sodium while maintaining a desirable product.

Another student in Youngsoo Lee’s lab, Josephine Christina, is exploring alternative structures for salt applied topically to products such as chips and crackers.

Stretching the dollar

Lifestyle and food budget can impact sodium consumption, Cox notes. “How do you tell someone who is worrying about paying their light bill to watch their sodium intake?” Processed foods, despite their convenience, are often laden with sodium. And cheap plus convenient often equals high in sodium, Cox adds.

Kuo believes this is where food scientists can make a key impact—by helping make processed foods healthier, tasty, and affordable. She hopes the gel project is just a start to the possible discoveries.

Although Cox wishes she could go back and spend time making healthier meals with her dad, she hopes that she can help other people in the future. “The need for sodium reduction is not going away,” she says. “People are getting older, bigger, and less healthy.” Whether she is creating new consumer-accepted products, growing awareness through public education, or continuing her research, Cox intends to make her dad proud.
In a U of I lecture hall, a sea of open laptops meets the professor’s eye as she looks out over the assembled students. In another classroom, laptops, tablets, and smartphones are banned. Which atmosphere is more conducive to learning? When ACES professors gathered to discuss the issue, three distinct viewpoints emerged.

**Jennifer Hardesty:** “I have a strict no-technology policy in my classes. That includes laptops for note taking.”

Hardesty, a professor in the Department of Human and Community Development, teaches an undergraduate class on critical family transitions and graduate courses on intimate partner violence and grounded theory.

“I first adopted my strict no-tech-in-the-classroom ban because I found the use of laptops and smartphones distracting and rude. Since then, I’ve done some reading on the topic, and I can back up my reasons for sticking with this policy,” Hardesty says.

According to Hardesty, research reveals that students who engage in classroom multitasking, regardless of the type of technology they use or for how long, perform worse in both immediate and long-term follow-up assessments of the material that was covered, she says.

Further, teachers describe a “cone of distraction” radiating from the screen of laptop owners to as many as 10 students seated nearby.

“If one student in the class is checking Facebook, you’d be surprised how many students can recall the details of the page their neighbor was viewing,” Hardesty adds.

Another study showed that students who took class notes by hand had greater comprehension than students who typed as the teacher spoke. Typists tend not to process information as well, she says.

But Hardesty is especially concerned that students seem unable to tolerate boredom and have attention spans that are disturbingly short.

“I teach family studies courses to students who will one day be working with children and families. We want to encourage these future social workers and child care workers to be present in those interactions and able to attend to those conversations. Learning to focus is a good investment in their professional development,” she says.
Darin Eastburn: “Technology is an important part of my classes. It’s the students’ future.”

Eastburn teaches an undergraduate course on plants, pathogens, and people and a graduate class on plant pathogenic fungi in the Department of Crop Sciences.

As Eastburn displays his smartphone, he remarks, “These devices hold a lot of information. When I think, ‘I’ve seen that actor before,’ I can find out where in a minute. I want to harness technology for my students in the classroom because that’s the future they’ll live in.”

So he welcomes laptops, tablets, and smartphones in his classes.

“Frequently during a lecture, I’ll ask students, What’s the answer to this? And there’s a long silence. So I’ll say, Do you have access to the Internet? Why don’t you investigate and tell me what you find out?”

Then students get engaged, look things up, and become part of the process. It’s not just me talking anymore. I’m not the most important person in the room,” he says.

If Eastburn sees three students staring at a screen that’s not relevant to the discussion, he’ll ask them to shut the laptop. But he believes that students are adults and they can make their own decisions. If they’re not getting the grades they want, they can alter their behavior, he says.

Eastburn offers an interesting take on the distraction debate, saying that students have an emotional attachment to their technology and tend to be distracted if they don’t have it.

“In the future, with the Apple Watch and Google Glass, technology will be invisible, and we won’t know if students have access to it or not. We may soon be dealing with students who are using technology to cheat on an exam. As teachers, we’re going to have to adapt—by changing our policies or changing the way we evaluate students—because the technology will be available, and why shouldn’t students have it?” he says.

Dave Rosch: “I have a soft ban. If you want to bring a laptop into my class, you need a good reason.”

Rosch teaches leadership courses in the agricultural education leadership program.

“I think the evidence is strong that people don’t multitask well, that students do not recognize when they’re not paying attention, and that technology users even display an addictive impulse for checking their text messages—the physiological response is similar to the response you’d see in any addicted individual,” Rosch says.

Rosch’s classroom policy is a soft ban—no laptop for note taking unless the student can explain why it is needed. (That helps eliminate furious, furtive typing of assignments due in the next few hours.) Students using a laptop do so from the back row to avoid distracting others.

“At the same time, Rosch covers controversial issues in his classes, so he asks students to refrain from taking photos and videotaping.

“We all have to learn what to do with ourselves instead of reaching for something to eat, checking our email, or texting.”

Jennifer Hardesty: “I teach family studies courses to students who will one day be working with children and families…. Learning to focus is a good investment in their professional development.”
With just over 2,000 pandas on the planet, scientists worldwide are racing to find answers to help the species repopulate and recover from illegal hunting, habitat loss, and other human-related causes of mortality. To complicate the challenge, the window for pandas to reproduce is narrow, as females only ovulate once a year. The stakes are high for those trying to protect the panda from extinction.

Dr. Tameka Phillips, an ACES animal sciences graduate, is among those looking for answers, in her case at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington, DC. Phillips studies gametes (sperm and egg), the cells involved in fertilization and reproduction.

As a member of the zoo’s giant panda reproduction team, she assisted with the breeding of Mei Xiang, one of a few hundred pandas alive today in captivity. Giant panda births are rare—Bao Bao (“Precious Treasure,” born in August 2013) is the result of the zoo’s artificial insemination efforts.

Phillips says she was in awe the first time she worked with the zoo’s pandas. “Even as a professional, it is hard not to ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ over them,” she says.

Phillips’ passion for advancing fertility research motivates her efforts each day.

“The science of reproduction is my niche,” Phillips says. “The more I learn about the intricacies of reproduction, the more I enjoy what I do.”

Phillips discovered her passion for animals in high school through the College of ACES Research Apprentice Program (RAP). She worked with animals, learned about research techniques, and found her way around the ACES campus during the summer program. The experience helped her decide to attend college at Illinois.

ACES helped chart the path for Phillips’ career, which took her to the University of Florida for her master’s and doctoral degrees before she began her career with the Smithsonian.

“The great thing about Illinois was the hands-on activity. So many kids went to other schools and didn’t get the hands-on experience. I was able to interact with animals and learn techniques with an actual animal instead of a computer model,” Phillips says.

Because of her extensive background in animal breeding, the National Zoo recruited Phillips to the giant panda reproduction team. In addition to her panda work, much of her day-to-day lab research involves improving animal and human fertility through gamete assessment and preservation.

In an era when women encounter difficulties becoming pregnant, cancer patients face sterility resulting from their treatments, and male soldiers are returning from war with fertility issues, her research is vital.

“Humans have to reproduce or we die,” Phillips says. “We are not asexual; we cannot just bud off like a flower. Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. There are so many things involved that can inhibit reproduction.”

This topic can be challenging to discuss with people without a science background like Phillips has. The general lack of public knowledge has spurred a passion for engaging others in conversations about reproduction and fertility.

“For some people, it is difficult to talk to small children, and sometimes even adults, about reproduction and fertility. For me, it just comes natural to talk about it,” Phillips says.

For several years she has spoken at STEM and diversity events about endangered animals and her research with pandas, reproduction, and fertility. She knows these steps are small, but she hopes they contribute to greater awareness.

“If we don’t conduct fertility research, animals like Bao Bao will go extinct,” she says. “We are trying to breed and maintain a genetic pool of giant pandas so we can keep them here for future generations to enjoy. We take for granted that what we see now will still be here in 50 years.”
Bao Bao
born August 2013
Everyone knows how miserable being sick can feel—lethargy, achiness, no appetite. Typically after a few days of rest, medicine, and fluids, you start to feel back to normal.

From the first exposure to the bacteria or virus that makes you sick, a system of inflammatory responses throughout your body and brain starts the battle against the infection to make you well again. So the fatigue and the fever you may be working to eliminate are actually necessary in order to feel better.

Researchers studying inflammatory responses in mice have noticed an interesting reaction to stressors such as infection in certain cells in the brain. The cells, called microglia, act as the brain’s immune defense system, releasing anti-inflammatory molecules that combat an infection or challenge.

In some cases, the response of these cells can cause long-term behavioral changes. In livestock and companion animals, long-term depression behaviors can mean animals eat less, which in turn can cause weight loss or hinder growth.

Scott Nixon, a Ph.D. student, and Sandra Rodriguez-Zas, a professor of genetics, genomics, and bioinformatics, both in the Department of Animal Sciences, looked at how the inflammatory state affects the brain’s microglia, especially the association with depression-like behaviors that can become chronic.

They set out to understand how the microglia react to a stressor (a bacterial infection in this case) from a molecular point of view. By studying mice, a well-understood animal model, they narrowed down potential target molecules in the brain.

The U of I researchers, along with collaborators from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, observed that mice exposed to a bacteria continued to show depression-like symptoms, especially loss of interest in activities (termed anhedonia), even after the sickness behavior had ended. They showed less preference for eating things they had previously loved, especially anything containing sucrose. The animals moved less and didn’t swim as they normally would. The mice stopped engaging in basic survival skills because of lethargy, Rodriguez-Zas says.

She and Nixon next used RNA sequencing to gain snapshots of gene expression in the mice’s brains after infection. Nixon notes that while other studies have looked at how particular genes in the brain respond to stressors, their study looks at how all of the genes are responding.

“We can get a snapshot of all of the gene responses simultaneously, which gives us more context than just seeing what one gene is doing,” he explains.

Ultimately, the goal is to understand what genes are over- or under-expressed when an animal or person gets sick and the corresponding pathway changes.

“Identifying the genes and networks that are altered by the stressor helps us identify therapies that can ameliorate or counteract the inflammatory response of the microglia to a challenge that affects feeding intake,” Rodriguez-Zas notes. “It could help us identify therapies for humans or animals.

“With livestock species, if they stop eating, they don’t grow, and that means more time for the farmers to keep those animals. There are cognitive changes, too—less of a problem for livestock, but very important in humans, companion animals, and biomedical models,” she adds. “We are trying to understand the phenotypical responses and the associated molecular pathways. If I can pinpoint a gene or set of genes, we can think about a therapy to counteract negative effects.”

Understanding how such effects become chronic is also an important part of the study. The researchers hypothesized that after an infection, the microglia stay in a state, waiting to respond to the next stressor based on how they were impacted in the past.

“Suddenly you have these cells that are always waiting to respond to something, always responding even though there might not be a challenge of inflammation,” Rodriguez-Zas says. “That may cause longer-term changes in the behavior.

“The novelty is understanding these molecular networks; then in subsequent studies where the challenge is different, we can see which genes are common. If we develop therapies for those, we can investigate the effectiveness of these therapies for other inflammatory responses.”

Along with infection, she notes, other types of stress can result in inflammation. In livestock, factors like overfeeding, management stress, and specific diet compounds can cause inflammation. In humans, aging, poor diet, and obesity can be causes.

“Inflammation is good to defend ourselves, but chronic activation of the microglia can trigger other things, such as changes in behavior. It can also cause neurological problems in terms of development, function, or survival of the neurons,” she explains.

The researchers said the study is a work in progress. “I am very excited about the results because they are helping us contextualize all this data we get from the microglia, and we can start looking at particular points of interest,” Nixon says. “One pathway is lighting up, and it is connected to other pathways. We can take that design and start applying it across species and see if we get the same response.”

By Stephanie Henry
The food truck craze is heating up in Champaign-Urbana. Did you know that two of the area’s most popular trucks have more in common than tempting menus? Both trucks are owned and operated by College of ACES graduates. Although Daniel Krause of Cracked and James Kyung of Pandamonium Doughnuts grew up with a great appreciation for food, neither envisioned a food truck in his future. But the young entrepreneurs are both drawing crowds to their flavorful creations.

Food Truck, Owner
- Cracked, Daniel Krause, age 25
- Pandamonium Doughnuts, James Kyung, age 29

Major
- Food Science and Human Nutrition, 2012
- Animal Sciences, 2009

Hometown
- Wilmette, Illinois
- Naperville, Illinois

What were your childhood dreams?
- I’ve always wanted to be a part of the food industry. Growing up, I saw food as a way to connect with family and friends. Food made me happy, and I wanted to share my love for food and unique sense of food with others.
- When I was younger, all I wanted to do was work with animals. I’ve always had pets and wanted to become a veterinarian.

How did you find your way to the College of ACES?
- Both of my parents went to the University of Illinois, and we’ve been attending football and basketball games here as a family for as long as I can remember. We’d attend the game, go bowling at the Union, and finish the night off with Garcia’s pizza. U of I was where I always pictured myself, and I have always been interested in food science.
- The only school I applied to was the University of Illinois. I’ll be honest—it worried my parents that I only applied here. Thankfully I made it in! I wanted to be a vet and knew that the U of I Department of Animal Sciences was the perfect fit.

Where did you get the idea to start a food truck?
- During an internship with Lettuce Entertain You in Chicago the summer before my junior year of college, I was put into a group with three other interns and given the challenge to create a restaurant concept. Long story short, I pitched an omelet bar idea to my group. They liked it, and “Cracked” began taking shape. Although our concept did not include a food truck, it served as a catalyst for my future decision to put my restaurant idea on wheels.
- A food truck business was never my intention—the doughnut thing happened by accident. One day my hobby turned into selling 3 dozen doughnuts at the Urbana farmers market. We experimented with a pop-up shop [a temporary storefront] three weekends in March 2014. The success was overwhelming—we sold out of our entire supply in 20 minutes. We kept bringing more and more, and finally we opened a food truck later that fall.
Why did you choose Champaign-Urbana?
- Champaign-Urbana was a fairly open market for food trucks. The startup money to get one going here was more in line with what I could realistically afford.
- This is my home now. The people in Champaign-Urbana are amazing. We have so much support from people, and entrepreneurship is greatly valued. I can't imagine finding this support and community backing anywhere else.

Describe your menu.
- My menu is full of breakfast sandwich combinations that I dreamt up during college. Most contain my hash patty recipe, altered from my mom's potato latke.
- Artisan doughnuts made from scratch with no premade mixes or icings. Everything on the menu is made in-house every morning before it goes out on the truck. We offer unique flavors, from traditional Vanilla Bean to gourmet Salted Caramel, and even some that are a little crazy—like the Samoa, based on the popular Girl Scout cookie.

What's your busiest shift?
- 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., and midnight to 2 a.m.
- 7 to 9 a.m.

What value do food trucks offer campus?
- Food trucks are vibrant and catch your eye—they are almost like beautification for campus. It's a quick, easy way to eat, especially for students on the way to class. It offers a different food option in a quick-service fashion.
- Looking at the food scene on campus, there are many chains and big corporations represented. Food trucks are mostly locally run, so they offer a unique variety of food options while providing great value for the community.

How have sales picked up since you started?
- We started out with one truck and sold about 50 sandwiches a day. Now we have two trucks and average 500 to 600 sandwiches a day.
- We sold about 40 donuts at our first farmers market. Today we sell up to 1,000 or more.

What's the best part of owning a food truck?
- Seeing the response on campus and in town is flattering and humbling. Knowing people like the food so much is rewarding and keeps me going. I would have never expected such a response.
- It’s very fun—each day is different. You meet so many great people and fellow business owners in town. The truck helps us connect with our community and be more involved in making a difference. And it's great to see people enjoy your products!

And what's the hardest part?
- Taking over the business from my two original partners has been tough. I was trying to do it all initially. I had to learn how to get better organized and communicate more effectively. I got into this because I like food . . . not because I like dealing with truck maintenance.
- Balancing everything is challenging—especially before we hired employees. So much work is involved in starting and maintaining a business that you don’t fully realize until you do it. I don’t get a lot of sleep, as I’ve had a lot to learn and figure out along the way.

What advice do you have for aspiring business owners?
- Don't be afraid to make mistakes—you will. Mistakes will grow your company as long as you learn from them.
- There will be new challenges every day, so you have to constantly adapt. Nothing ever goes as you plan. Things always pop up—sometimes in your favor, but sometimes not. Learn how to collaborate—don't rely just on yourself.
What was the best ACES class you took in college?

My basic food science and chemistry courses have been awesome in helping me with the food standards for my business.

Working with Farm Animals and Conservation of Zoo Animals. Both classes taught me so much and opened my eyes to things I never knew. Plus, they were a lot of fun.

Who inspires you?

My parents have been unbelievable role models in this journey. My mom is a journalist and has taught me how to talk to the media and present myself on television. She’s a huge influence on my love of food. She worked at the Chicago Tribune, but still found a way to cook us dinner every night when I was growing up. She’s the catalyst for why I love food. My dad is an accountant and serves as my CFO. I talk to him daily, and he guides me through the books and helping my business go financially.

My parents have made such a big impact on my life. They’ve owned a restaurant up north ever since I was little. I’ve seen how hard they’ve worked to make their business succeed. My dad is a chef and is constantly in the kitchen. And now I’m finding myself doing the same thing, though growing up, I didn’t expect to find myself here today. They’ve shared a lot of great advice, but most importantly have taught me to work hard to get what I need. Nothing is ever given to you.

What’s your favorite menu item?

YUM! Goy Vey—a mix of hash, egg, fried salami, bacon, and sweet and spicy cream cheese.

It’s too hard to choose! I really like the PB&J, Cookies N’ Cream, and S’mores.

What do you do for fun?

I’m in a weekly bowling league, play indoor soccer once a week, and like to watch sports.

I love food and enjoy going out to eat a lot. I also like to run, travel, and be out in nature.

How did the University of Illinois shape you?

The university helped shape me into a hardworking, driven individual. I learned how to break out of my comfort zone by taking new classes. U of I helped expand my horizons and diversify my knowledge, which comes in handy as a business owner today.

U of I was the most impactful to me as a personal growth opportunity. Education was a big part; I’m very proud of my degree. But in terms of personal growth, I came here being very quiet and shy. I struggled in school at first, but by the end of my college experience, I was a much better student and more involved in organizations and groups. Developing into the person I am today was a big part of my experience.

What does the future hold for your food truck?

I don’t foresee adding more trucks at this time. I envision the concept growing more from a delivery and catering standpoint. I’m trying to grow the brand and the name. I’ve considered franchising on other college campuses.

Someday I would like to have a physical storefront. In the meantime, I plan to focus on the one truck and continue to experiment with new flavors and new things to do with doughnuts. I have lots of ideas circulating, but mostly I want to make the food truck the best it can be and keep things interesting.

Any last words for us?

The food truck scene in C-U is a constantly changing and growing community. It’s important for us to work together and act as a unified group to help each other grow and succeed in such a competitive market.

At the end of the day, it’s still a doughnut. We may not change the world with these doughnuts, but we hope people have a fun and enjoyable experience while they eat them!
ACES student travels three times to Cameroon to improve access to clean drinking water

By Leanne Lucas
Photo by Colleen Lyons
Nora Onstad works at a monitoring well in the village of Ntisaw. These wells are used to measure the depth of the water table so that the distribution system is deep enough to capture water for the entire community.

“I missed Google a lot…”

Nora Onstad, a 2015 graduate in agricultural and biological engineering (ABE), is talking about her time in central Africa, and she makes that statement with a shrug and a self-deprecating smile. She understands better than most that easy, reliable access to digital technology is a privilege out of reach for many around the world.

Onstad has traveled to the Republic of Cameroon every year since 2012. Through the U of I chapter of Engineers Without Borders, she works to provide convenient access to clean drinking water for the 800 citizens of Ntisaw village. Onstad was awarded the 2015 Illinois International Undergraduate Achievement Award for her work in Cameroon and for her leadership and collaboration in continuing her global water quality work upon returning to campus.

Onstad’s third trip to Cameroon, in the spring semester of her junior year, was funded by a British Petroleum scholarship she received through the Department of ABE. She spent five months in Ntisaw doing independent study in water research under the direction of ABE professor Richard Cooke.

“I worked with women and schools on health education projects,” Onstad says. “At one of the first meetings I held I asked if anyone wanted to help me, and two women volunteered. One was a midwife, Satu Yika; she was already aware of a lot of general health issues. The other was a young woman about my age, Gour Lubabato Yah. Her English was fairly good, so she helped a lot with communication. I would talk with the two of them about different health issues, and then they would lead the workshop in Limbum, their local dialect.”

Onstad stayed in a home provided by a Baptist missionary. The accommodations were rudimentary: “The house was made of mud bricks. We had a room where we could shower and a pit latrine. It was really just a big hole behind the house, but we were lucky enough to have a concrete slab with a hole in it, so no rotting planks or anything like that.”

Adjusting to the cultural differences in Cameroon was much easier during Onstad’s extended stay in the country than during her shorter trips. “I got into a routine, and everyone was helpful and friendly.” Even though Onstad speaks French, which, with English, is the country’s official language, she didn’t know the local dialect.

“I tried to learn Limbum,” she says, “and everyone would get so excited when I spoke even one word. And they taught me phrases like ‘The ants are biting me.’ Yeah, the ants were vicious.”

Onstad did have Internet access while in Ntisaw, but “you could sit on the hill with your computer for 30 or 40 minutes before anything would load. If things went quickly, you could look at four or five emails in an hour. But you had to copy them into a Word document to answer later.”

Over time, Onstad started to enjoy not having to deal with continual texts and emails. “When I came home, the change was a shock. I had always been very good at responding to emails, but after I came back I would look at them and think, ‘Oh, that can wait.’ The reverse culture shock was something I never expected. You hear about it, but it’s hard to understand if you don’t experience it firsthand.”

She stays in touch with Lubabato, who was recently married. “She moved to Douala [the largest city in Cameroon] and she has access to Facebook now, so we write on Facebook Messenger a lot.”

Onstad continued her work in water quality issues her senior year. She was a teaching assistant for ABE 199: Water in the Global Environment, working with professors Prasanta Kalita, Paul Davidson, and Rabin Bhattachari. “I helped on the field trips we took, I did a lot of grading, and when the professors were at a conference, I taught the class and discussed some of the things I’ve done in Cameroon.”

Her work has received numerous honors, including two from the University of Illinois YMCA. In addition to the BP Undergraduate Scholarship for International Opportunities in Water Research, she received the Waterborne Environmental Scholarship for Excellence in Soil and Water Resources and the Richard C. and Helen Coddington Design Team Award, all from ABE.

She is now attending the University of North Carolina to obtain her master’s degree in biological and agricultural engineering. Working with the professors in ABE was significant in Onstad’s decision to continue in academia.

“During my study abroad semester, Dr. Cooke came to Ntisaw over spring break to visit my project,” Onstad says. “Working closely with him and all the professors in ABE had a huge impact on me. I want to do what they do—work one-on-one with students—and continue international work.”
Students come together to produce sustainable agriculture model

By Stephanie Henry  
Photos by Kevin Wolz

In just south of the main U of I campus sits the Woody Perennial Polyculture project—the WPP. While together the research plots constitute a food-producing farm, it doesn’t look like the row crops seen in much of central Illinois.

Interest in alternative methods of farming is growing among U of I students as researchers seek ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase biodiversity while still using land to produce food.

When two U of I biology undergraduates, with little experience in agriculture, crossed paths with a Wisconsin farmer who was experimenting with woody perennial and polyculture systems that produce food, the two were eager to research its feasibility in Illinois.

The initial project was the brainchild of Ron Revord and Kevin Wolz, who at the time were exploring graduate research areas related to sustainability and ecology. Revord was finishing a degree in molecular and cellular biology and Wolz in integrative biology and environmental engineering.

Six Plant Layers of a Savanna-Based Woody Perennial Polyculture

Illustration by Amy Koester
The two were intrigued by Mark Shepard’s model of producing food for human consumption from woody perennial crops (food-producing trees, shrubs, and others) on land that modeled native ecosystems. Shepard had been growing these systems for several years, but little research existed to support his approach.

“Ron and I were trying to figure out how to get all these cool things that Shepard and others were exploring into the academic world,” Wolz says. “A lot of claims and ideas out there had not necessarily been supported by scientific research.”

So with support from the NRES Agroecology and Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP), the two invited Shepard to campus to present his ideas on Earth Day in 2012. Revord says the presentation refocused research paths for both him and Wolz. (Both are now doctoral students, Revord in NRES and Wolz in the Program in Ecology, Evolution, and Conservation Biology.)

“We didn’t want to follow the paradigms that existed—corn and soy, or even perennial grasses,” Revord says. “We wanted to work on ag systems that would mix food production and environmental benefits.”

“The tinder in the fire pile was already there, but the presentation was the match that lit it,” he adds.

NRES professor Michelle Wander remembers that the two were eager to get trees in the ground and their research underway. She encouraged them to do their experiment at the U of I. Bruce Branham, a crop sciences professor who works with the Sustainable Student Farm, provided trees for planting, and the campus Student Sustainability Committee and ASAP provided additional funding.

Later in 2012, the team installed 3,300 plants, including chestnut, hazelnut, apple, grape, currant, and raspberry, to establish the Woody Perennial Polyculture research project, the first of its kind in the Midwest.

But those first 5 acres would only mark the beginning of support and interest from across campus for the research’s potential.

Ultimately Revord and Wolz hope to demonstrate a sustainable and economically viable alternative to the corn and soybean rotation used on most midwestern farms.

Concerns about monocrop agriculture’s low food and environmental diversity have helped drive the research. Using pairings of woody plant species, the project aims to mimic the structure and function of natural ecosystems and to sustainably produce an agricultural yield while also restoring ecosystem “services,” the direct and indirect contributions of ecosystems to human well-being.

“If we can develop a multifunctional woody polyculture system that has commercial viability in the food it produces, then we can bring back some of the ecological function, which has benefits both locally and globally,” Revord says.

The savanna-based WPP has a grassy understory, scattered canopy trees, and a variety of shrub layers. Most species in this system have long or indefinite productive lives.

Revord and Wolz, who bring complementary skill sets to their project, designed the WPP site based on some of the innovative pairings Shepard experimented with.

Wolz’s engineering background defines his work on the project. “Agriculture in my mind is an engineered ecosystem,” he says. “It has to be designed by humans. Even if we’re designing ecological systems, you’ve got to know how to think like an engineer.”

“Ron’s focus is creating the tools—well-developed, well-bred plants adapted to do the things we want them to do. He comes up with the awesome tools, and I study how to best put them together into systems—polycultures.”

Revord’s research has focused on the genetics and breeding aspects of the hazelnut. No cultivars exist at this time for hazelnut in the Midwest, which Revord would like to see change.

Wander calls the growing polyculture work—the result of two students’ enthusiasm—“an odyssey.”

Sarah Taylor Lovell, an assistant professor in crop sciences, saw an opportunity to scale up the WPP research with the help of a multidisciplinary team.

In 2014, the team was awarded more than $400,000 in seed money from the U of I Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment (iSEE) to expand their research.
on a new site—the Multifunctional Woody Polyculture project (MWP). In addition to Revord, Wolz, and Lovell, the team includes Wander and Branham; Nick Paulson, associate professor of agricultural and consumer economics; Wendy Yang, assistant professor of plant biology; and Jeremy Guest, assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering.

In May, the researchers planted over 12,000 trees and shrubs on 20-plus acres near the U of I Energy Farm. Different from the WPP, where one treatment was replicated four times, the MWP will include multiple combinations of plantings, or treatments. Treatments will include single species or combinations such as hazelnut, chestnut, and apple trees; currants; and elderberries.

Wolz says that they will be exploring the best way to combine species and the benefits of combining species versus growing monocultures, especially in regard to yield.

“The WPP was simple and was not able to answer all the questions we had,” Wolz says. “The new project will allow us to explore multiple things, such as if you have just a layer of nut trees, how does that compare to having an orchard of nut trees with another crop underneath.”

Lovell explains that the systems they are researching could replace portions of agriculture lands, implemented on a scale with enough production capability to provide profit for landowners.

“We’re not expecting that large growers will transition huge acreage, but there is potential on smaller fields or marginal land, such as areas of farms that are wet or have high erosion potential or exist next to a river, where a buffer area is appropriate.

“Polyculture systems can provide agricultural products along with environmental benefits,” she adds.

The benefits include reducing greenhouse gas emissions; woody biomass stores carbon and keeps it from going into the atmosphere. Also, fewer agricultural inputs are needed in woody systems because of better nutrient use and water use efficiency in the species that are grown. Providing habitat for wildlife and drawing in pollinators are other benefits.

“We have a pretty brittle food system,” Wander says, citing the threat to the nut crop in California during its recent drought crisis. “If a crop is concentrated in one place, we are vulnerable. This is a permaculture principle and core tenet of sustainable agriculture: we want to diversify.”

Through the polyculture work, “we are showing that all these crops are in our geographic potential,” she adds. “It may seem audacious to say we can grow nuts in Illinois. But hopefully this research will inspire people to see that we can do more.”

Currently the MWP is a three-year funded project, but the team aims to bring in support from other sources. “Ultimately the goal is for this project to be long term—10, 20, or more years,” Lovell says.

“It’s a good model of multidisciplinary work bringing a lot of people to the table to look at a complex problem. It could make an important contribution to the problem of food security, particularly in a changing climate.”
Kevin Wolz’s work on the South Farms is already having an impact. The Refuge Food Forest in Normal is an urban demonstration site for the University of Illinois woody perennial polyculture research. U of I Extension partnered with the Town of Normal, the Savanna Institute, and Midwest Agriculture & Restoration Services to create the first urban food forest in an Illinois public park. The food forest, a form of urban agroforestry designed to create a sustainable food production system, integrates a diversity of fruit and nut trees, berries, herbs, and vegetables. The end result is intended to be an edible landscape, largely self-sustaining and open to the public for harvesting.

“The food forest is designed to build community and help people reconnect with the source of their food,” says Extension educator Bill Davison. Last spring some 75 volunteers, ranging from preschoolers to great-grandparents, planted 2,500 fruit trees, shrubs, cane fruits, perennial vegetables, herbs, and native prairie plants. Volunteers continue to maintain and weed the growing forest.

The Refuge, named for an orphanage once on the site, is on town-owned property northeast of Illinois State University. The location is accessible from a nearby bike trail and is walking distance of the Mulberry School and Normal Community Activity Center.

“We are thrilled to build on the research and advice of Kevin and others on campus at Illinois,” Davison says. “Based on observations from the Urbana site, we should expect a tremendous increase in the amount of life and ecological services in our food forest in the next two years.”

The residents of Normal can also look forward to the textures and flavors of fresh delights, including raspberries, grapes, gooseberries, apples, pears, hazelnuts, and chestnuts.
Highlighting some of the successes of our ACES family in their pursuits to make an impact on society and find solutions to some of the world’s greatest challenges.

In garnering top honors in the campus “I Love Illinois Week” Friendly Facebook Competition, the College of ACES gained more than 1,000 new likes, a 35% increase.

Amy Ando, a professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, is one of three new University Fellows appointed by Resources for the Future. RFF is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that improves environmental and natural resource policymaking through objective social science research. The title of university fellow is bestowed on innovative scholars from around the world studying the economics of natural and environmental resources.

Dawn Bohn, food science and human nutrition teaching associate and director for off-campus programs, received a Campus Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in May. Award recipients are chosen for superior teaching, mentoring, and advising.

Natural resources and environmental sciences graduate student Betsy Breyer has been accepted into the nationally competitive Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship Program. The fellowship helps early-stage doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences formulate innovative research proposals through summer research and faculty mentorship.

Five U of I crop sciences students—Clayton Carley, Hannah Donoho, Kris Heller, Kaelyn Knoche, and Sara Reising—were chosen as Golden Opportunity Scholars by the American Society of Agronomy, the Crop Science Society of America, and the Soil Science Society of America. The program encourages talented students to prepare for leadership roles in those fields by matching them with scientist-mentors and providing financial support for them to attend the society annual meetings.

Food science and human nutrition graduate students Angie Daum and Max Van Tassel were the first-place winners for their product “Mystical Lemon Berry Blush,” a color-changing novelty gelato, in the 2014–15 Natural Coloring Competition for Students sponsored by DDW The Colour House. The team members received their prize, including a cash award, at the July annual meeting of the Institute of Food Technologists.

The Water Quality Team—Mark David, professor; Corey Mitchell, research specialist in agriculture; and Lowell Gentry, senior research specialist in agriculture—received the Water Quality Advocates Award from the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District.

U of I President Emeritus Robert A. Easter was presented the Above and Beyond Award at the 2015 National Agricultural Alumni and Development Association (NAADA) Conference. The award recognizes his support of the College of ACES, working outside the realm of his official responsibilities to further the goals of ACES alumni, communications, development, and student services programs while demonstrating leadership skills that inspire others.

Food science and human nutrition senior Elise Ellinger was selected by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs as a 2015 Next Generation Delegate to the invitation-only Global Food Security Symposium. Eighteen students internationally were chosen to attend the April symposium in Washington, DC.

The Field and Furrow Club will celebrate its 80th anniversary this fall. Alumni are invited to attend a variety of events, including a social hour at the I Hotel on Friday, Nov. 6, at 5 p.m. On Saturday, Nov. 7, cheer on the Illini football team from afar and join the group for lunch in the 77 Club of Memorial Stadium at 11 a.m. After the game, take a tour of the newly

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**IN THE SPOTLIGHT**

Seven ACES faculty and two ACES graduate students were honored with awards at the June meeting of the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture:

**Teaching and Leadership Award:**
Lisa Burgooan, Agricultural Education/Leadership Studies Minor; Lulu Rodriguez, Agricultural Communications; Anna Delser, Animal Sciences; Pat Tranel, Crop Sciences; Michael Ward, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

**Regional Outstanding Teacher:**
Soo Lee, Food Science and Human Nutrition and Academic Programs

**Distinguished Educator:**
Laurie Kramer, Academic Programs

**Graduate Student Teaching Award:**
Adam Ahlers, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences
Kim Crossman, Human and Community Development

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renovated basement lab spaces in Turner Hall. The weekend’s celebration will conclude on Saturday night with dinner at the I Hotel.

**Barbara Fiese**, professor and director of the Family Resiliency Center, is incoming editor of the *Journal of Family Psychology*, a premier family research journal devoted to the study of the family system.

**Mike Gray**, crop sciences extension coordinator, was invited by Iowa State University to give the prestigious Stanforth Memorial Lecture in April. Gray spoke on “Managing Pests in the Transgenic Era: Is the Integration in IPM an All But Forgotten Consideration?”

**Illini ACT** captured the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) Chapter of the Year Award at the 2015 Ag Media Summit. Agricultural communications junior **Kelsey Litchfield** was awarded the Jim Evans Scholarship by the American Agricultural Editors Association and the Distinguished ACT Member of the Year Award by National ACT. In addition, agricultural communications senior **Kendall Herren** was named a Forrest Bassford Travel Award Winner by the Livestock Publications Council.

**Dina IzenstarK**, a doctoral student in human development and family studies, won the inaugural Pillars of National Recreation and Park Association Award for Best Research Abstract in Health and Wellness for her paper analyzing how low-income moms use nature-based activities to promote the health of their families.

Agricultural and consumer economics graduate student **Kashi Kafle** was named to the 2015 Class of Future Leaders of the Association of International Agricultural and Rural Development. Kafle and 11 other students were awarded scholarships to attend the 2015 AIARD annual conference and to visit a variety of NGOs and consulting firms as well as USAID to gain insight into career opportunities in international agriculture and rural development.

Agricultural and biological engineering professor **Prasanta Kalita** was one of two recipients of the campus Sheth Distinguished Faculty Award for International Achievement, given for significant contributions to strengthening the international dimension of the University of Illinois.

**Justine Karduck**, MS, RD/N, was named the 2013-2014 Outstanding Dietetics Educator by the Illinois Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

**Ana Martín-Ryals**, a doctoral student in agricultural and biological engineering, was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct dissertation research at the University of Barcelona on ways to improve wastewater treatment. Her research aims to help scientists and engineers design ways to sustainably reuse wastewater.

In July **Neal Merchen**, professor and ACES associate dean for research, was named a Fellow of the American Society of Animal Science. Merchen was recognized for his distinguished career as a scientist, teacher, and administrator over 35 years.

Human development and family studies doctoral student **Kale Monk** received the 2014 Best Student Research Paper Award from the National Council on Family Relations for “Trauma Disclosure as a Buffer in Military Couples’ Relationships.”

Associate professor **Nick Paulson** received the Distinguished Teaching Award for Less Than Ten Years’ Experience at the July annual meeting of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association. The group’s teaching awards recognize outstanding ability and performance as a teacher of agricultural or applied economics.

Animal sciences professor **Hans Stein** received the DSM Nutritional Sciences Award at the 13th Symposium on Digestive Physiology in Pigs in May in Poland. This lifetime achievement award honors scientific discovery that has significantly contributed to improving animal nutrition and health through innovative concepts and more sustainable animal farming.

The **Illinois Solar Decathlon** team finished in the top 5 out of 33 teams, placing as one of four Grand Winner Finalists, in the Department of Energy’s Race to Zero Student Design Competition. Participants competed in designing cost-effective, zero energy homes for mainstream builders.

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**Thirteen new faculty have joined the College of ACES this year:**

**Maria Cattai De Godoy**, assistant professor in the Department of Animal Sciences

**Peter Christensen**, assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics

**Sandy Dall’erba**, associate professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics

**Teresa Serra Devesa**, assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics

**Kelly Tu Frantz**, assistant professor in the Department of Human and Community Development

**Hannah Holscher**, assistant professor in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition

**Tiffany Jamann**, assistant professor in the Department of Crop Sciences

**Eric Larson**, assistant professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

**Santiago Mideros**, assistant professor in the Department of Crop Sciences

**Daniel Miller**, assistant professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

**Jason Ridlon**, assistant professor in the Department of Animal Sciences

**Matthew Stasiewicz**, assistant professor in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition

**Anthony Studer**, assistant professor in the Department of Crop Sciences
Connecting with peers and faculty to form a community of friendship, mentoring, and support can be a challenge on a Big Ten campus. But at the University of Illinois, one theme has recurred for decades in conversations with ACES students and alumni: ACES is a family away from home, and the people and experiences there are life-changing.

Glen Broom, who was in the first class of graduates from the agricultural communications major in 1963, was one of those who found a community in ACES. Through the support of Nabor House agricultural fraternity, the ag communications program, and staff in the Extension editorial office, Broom transformed his education into a lifetime of accomplishments. He even achieved two early dreams—to watch a real bullfight, and to visit the pyramids of Egypt.

Gifted in math, Broom began college in agricultural engineering. But working as a student assistant in the campus Extension editorial office convinced him to change majors.

“I started in the exhibits section. After my freshman year, they recruited me into photography. I really took to everything about it. I loved working in the darkroom and seeing pictures develop. So I began looking for something that would let me do those things,” Broom says.

But first Broom left campus after his sophomore year for a period of active military duty. When he returned, the ag communications major had just begun, and he decided to make that his career direction. Little did he know the importance of his decision.

After Broom graduated, Extension editor Hadley Read offered him his first full-time job.

“[Read] called me into the office one day. ‘How would you like to be a radio editor?’ he asked.”

“‘Mr. Read, I don’t know anything about radio.’”

“We’ll teach you.”
Fast-forward two years to 1965, and Broom was now a radio natural. Read felt he was ready for the next step in his career.

“So again he called me into his office. ‘How would you like to go to Jordan?’”

Read, known internationally for his communications work, had received a contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development to create an extension editorial office in Jordan’s Ministry of Agriculture. Team leader Harold Guither and three other U of I Extension editorial staff (Vic Stephen, John Woods, and Broom) were to help establish the new office to distribute agricultural information to Jordanian farmers.

At the time, the College of Agriculture was the U of I’s lead college in international affairs. The work in Jordan was a small-two-year contract—not a big deal for the university or even the college, but a very big deal for young Broom.

Broom worked in the broadcast sector (there was no Jordanian television in 1965) with his Jordanian radio counterpart, whom he had previously worked with for six months at the U of I. Broom helped record and produce interviews with farmers and ag specialists, cooperating with a popular Ministry of Information radio broadcaster to get the segments on the air. Broom traveled throughout Jordan, a country about two-thirds the size of Illinois.

“It was a great experience, and I think we made a contribution,” he says.

With his wife, Betty, Broom took advantage of the travel to and from Jordan to visit Europe and Egypt, including seeing a bullfight in Barcelona and hiking around Egypt’s Great Pyramids of Giza, at high noon.

When Broom returned from his four-month assignment, Read had a new career avenue to propose. He wanted Broom to teach the campaign class in the ag communications curriculum.

Though Broom eventually accepted, he was hesitant. He felt he couldn’t offer enough information to his students.

“I thought my job was to fill them with knowledge. However, in my next position—in a training and consulting firm—I learned that I couldn’t teach people anything. Rather, once they felt they needed to know something, then I could help them learn. That has been my approach with students ever since,” Broom says.

After teaching the class for two spring semesters, Broom left Urbana to work for a Chicago foundation, which he and his partner took private to form a training and consulting firm. Five years later he began doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he later became head of the public relations sequence. Not enamored with Wisconsin winters, Broom accepted a faculty position at San Diego State University, where he spent the rest of his career. Though retired now, he continues to contribute to the success of future communicators as a co-author of the textbook Effective Public Relations.

As he looks back over his life, Broom names his mentor, Hadley Read, as his primary influence, someone who encouraged him to think through every life decision carefully. He urged Broom to be the best he could be, whatever the opportunity he was pursuing.

“Read is why I’ve always tried to be a good mentor to students,” Broom says. “He is my biggest memory of the U of I—all the help, encouragement, and opportunities he gave me. The university was a warm, friendly environment, but to have someone be your champion and point you in the right direction, that was incredible.”
The College of ACES Alumni Association has had a very rewarding year. We were very happy with the enthusiastic response to the inaugural ACES Family Academies on July 9-10 on campus, with more than 130 participants and volunteers! Alumni traveled from six states—Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, and Virginia. They stayed in new campus housing at Bousfield Hall and took part in four educational sessions conducted by ACES departments. It was a pleasure to see so many alumni sharing their Illini spirit with the next generation!

We are indebted to the college’s department heads, faculty, staff, and students for their support in this first-time endeavor. Many participants told us how interesting the class sessions were and how much they enjoyed the “hands-on” learning. I also want to thank members of the ACES Alumni board of directors, who volunteered on planning committees and engaged with alumni during the Family Academies. Of course, our ACES Alumni Association staff did many weeks of behind-the-scenes work. It took many of us working together to make the Family Academies a success. Thank you again! If you were a participant, please share your feedback with us so we can plan even better for the future.

ACES in Places events always gather college alumni in interesting places, like the U.S. Customs and Border Protection facilities at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport (August 22) and the Barber & Oberwortmann Horticulture Center in Joliet (October 15). Watch your e-mail for announcements about other upcoming events and locations so you can connect with us.

Recognizing outstanding alumni for their success and contributions is a key activity for us, and nominations for the 2016 ACES Award of Merit are due October 15 for recognition next spring. Young Alumni and Family Spirit award winners will be recognized at our College Connection event on Friday, September 11, at Champaign’s Hilton Hotel. I hope you can join us.

Stay up to date with future activities through our website or e-alumni newsletter. To share a current email address, please contact us at acesalumni@illinois.edu.

ACES Alumni Association
THE PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

By Bill Francis

The 2015 College of ACES Alumni Association Award of Merit winners are (from left) Dan Hoge, Dan Kittle, Greg Oltman, Susan Johnson, and Kenna Rathai.
ON THE HORIZON

September 1–3 :: Farm Progress Show, Decatur, IL
September 11 :: ACES Alumni Board Meeting; ACES College Connection and Round Barn Society
September 12 :: Salute to Ag Day
September 30 :: UIAA Awards Nominations Due
October 15 :: ACES Award of Merit Nominations Due; ACES in Places: Barber & Oberwortmann Horticultural Center, Joliet, IL
October 23–25 :: U of I Homecoming Weekend
October 24 :: Ag Comm Huddle
November 6–7 :: Field & Furrow 80th Anniversary
December 4 :: ACES Alumni Board Meeting

For more event announcements, including regional alumni events, visit acesalumni.illinois.edu. All events are on campus unless specified.

ACES Family Academies

The College of ACES Alumni Association hosted the inaugural ACES Family Academies on July 9 and 10. Approximately 160 people attended, including 97 participants and many hard-working volunteers. Thanks to all who helped make this first-time event a success. To see photos, visit flickr.com/photos/acesalumni/albums.

Attending the Farm Progress Show?

Join us at the Farm Progress Show in Decatur on September 1–3. We want to help you connect with other ACES alumni in the University of Illinois tent. Our tent will be a great meeting spot to catch up with college friends, colleagues, and faculty while learning more about what’s happening in ACES today.

Visit acesalumni.illinois.edu to sign up for the ACES Alumni Meet and Greet. Choose a time slot when you can stop by to network. Others may want to join you at the same time! Wanting to connect with alumni from a certain decade? Sign up for these daily time slots:

8–10 a.m.: 1960s and before
10 a.m.–noon: 1970s
1–2 p.m.: 1980s
2–3 p.m.: 1990s
3–5 p.m.: 2000s to present

We can’t wait to see all of the Illini pride at the Farm Progress Show 2015!

ACES E-Alumni Newsletter

Stay connected to the College of ACES! Be sure your email is up to date with us to have the latest news delivered to your inbox every other month. Email us at acesalumni@illinois.edu, or complete the Class Notes survey on the ACES Alumni Association website at acesalumni.illinois.edu.

ACES Alumni Class Notes

Check out Class Notes online at go.illinois.edu/acesclassnotes! Be sure to share any special times in your life with the ACES Alumni Association to keep your fellow alumni updated. Newly married or a new parent? A different job or a promotion? Publication of a book? We hope to hear from you!

STAY CONNECTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Fall always brings spectacular color to the University of Illinois campus, whether it’s the brilliant scarlet of berries or the burst of orange and blue that accompanies an Illini football weekend.