SENSE & SUSTAINABILITY

Ag Ed senior has big plans to make the world’s food production more sustainable for future generations.
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ACES senior Nejra Muminovic plans to join the Peace Corps after graduation to advocate for global sustainability.

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Considerable attention is being paid in Illinois to public support for higher education — or, more to the point, to the lack thereof. With relatively little state financial support, it has been a rough year as we try to provide the educational, research, and outreach programs expected from our state’s flagship, land-grant institution.

Fundamentally, state funds and tuition dollars form the building blocks of the university, including the College of ACES. Within ACES, over 95% of these monies are used for salaries of faculty and staff, providing the human capital that enables us to meet our academic and scholarly missions. These “building block” funds are then augmented by other types of funding; together, they undergird our consistency in being a first-class college, offering excellence in teaching, research, and extension.

For example, our scholars in ACES compete for and are typically awarded over $25 million annually from federal agencies and from the private sector for research involving food, energy, water, the environment, and family and community issues. The college also receives approximately $20 million each year in private philanthropy; these funds originate from, in rough percentages, individuals (50%), foundations (15%), and businesses (35%). About a quarter of these gifts support students; another quarter support research. The remaining funds are used for facilities, programs, and various other infrastructure and operational expenses.

So how does the eclectic funding I describe lead to premier programs that serve our students, our state, and our world? A recent, prominent example relates to the international work that takes place in ACES (see p. 26).

The Global Academy activities of our Office of International Programs are made possible largely through a gift from Arlys Conrad. The “Australian” experience is funded off-shore, and the African work referred to in “Into Africa” is a result of an award from the U.S. Agency for International Development. My point is that many of our activities are driven by faculty and staff whose salaries are covered by state and tuition funds. But their accomplishments are often made possible by other types of funding as well.

The take-home message here is that despite the setbacks caused by the absence of a state budget, the College of ACES remains great . . . and grateful. We very much appreciate the support from research agencies, from the private sector, and from our alums and friends who make it possible for us to excel, even during the rough times.

I’d like to close by expressing my gratitude to the many, many friends of the College of ACES across Illinois, the U.S., and the world who have helped me serve the college over the past seven years. My biggest surprise as dean has been the incredible support and assistance from ACES alums, friends, and stakeholders. I knew coming into the position that ACES is defined within by first-class people and programs. I did not appreciate, however, the myriad interests and relationships outside the college that have made my tenure as dean the best chapter of my career. Again . . . thank you.

Robert Hauser, Dean of the College of ACES
Ag Ed student shifts priorities after getting close to the land

By Lauren Quinn
Agricultural Education senior Nejra Muminovic has big plans to change attitudes about food and make the world’s food production more sustainable for future generations.

After emigrating from Bosnia at age 2½, Muminovic spent most of her childhood in the Chicago area. She describes herself in her late teenage years as self-conscious, obese, and uncomfortable in her own skin. So at 18, after “bombing” her first year at Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois, Muminovic was sent by her mother back to Bosnia to spend a summer on her grandmother’s farm. “It changed my life,” Muminovic says.

Muminovic adopted the ways of her majka — grandmother — and the local villagers. She spent each day helping her grandmother tend the small plot of land that grew a wide variety of produce, from potatoes to lettuce greens to strawberries.

At mealtimes, she’d wander into the garden and choose fresh salad greens, tomatoes, and cucumbers. When it was time for the weekly market in the village, she would walk, chatting with neighbors along the way.

“Waking up at the same time every day, eating at the same time every day, not eating too much, walking everywhere — your body gets used to these things, and you start to enjoy them,” Muminovic recalls. “After a couple weeks, I no longer wanted to eat sugary snacks.”

As a result, Muminovic shed 60 pounds during her summer in Bosnia.

But this isn’t a weight-loss story. In getting close to the land, Muminovic found that her perspective and priorities shifted. She decided that her passion was in sustainable agriculture. “You start to realize what is important in life, and the big thing is food,” she says.

Soon, Muminovic was hatching business plans and thinking about how she could spread the message about growing good food sustainably and finding pleasure in food. “I came up with my first business idea while I was in the garden in Bosnia: a company to reach out to people who want to create their own garden but don’t know how to and don’t have the resources. My company could give them the tools and knowledge to run their own garden, so everyone could experience the pleasure of eating something they actually grew,” she says.

When she got back home to the U.S., Muminovic read everything she could about sustainability and began applying herself in school. Then it came time to transfer to a four-year college to finish her degree. “The U of I seemed like the best option because it’s a land-grant institution and one of the highest-ranked agriculture schools,” Muminovic notes.

She enrolled in the Agricultural Leadership Education (Ag Ed) program in the College of ACES and immediately started volunteering for the Sustainable Student Farm. Like other farm volunteers, Muminovic was frustrated and perplexed by the fact that other students
seemed unaware of the farm’s existence, not realizing that much of its produce goes directly to campus dining halls.

During one of her Ag Ed classes, Training Needs Assessment, Muminovic chose to analyze the Sustainable Student Farm to determine how to increase its profile among students.

“I looked at how people heard about the farm,” she recalls. “Zero people found out about it through social media, which was astonishing to me.”

In the continuation of that class, Training and Development, Muminovic developed a four-day social media training program designed to be implemented by the Sustainable Student Farm or other sustainable farming operations to build their public brand.

Her professor for the two courses, Debra Korte, was impressed.

“Nejra has exceptional talents in graphic design, video editing, and program planning. Just as importantly, she understands the many facets of global agriculture and the need to produce a healthy and sustainable food supply,” Korte says.

This summer Muminovic used the skills she learned in Korte’s classes as an intern for the farm. But her sights are set much farther afield; after graduation, she plans to join the Peace Corps to spread her message of sustainability.

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Muminovic has targeted Cornell University’s program in International Agriculture and Rural Development for graduate school after her stint in the Peace Corps.

“That’s what I have planned so far: advocating for global sustainability. On the first day of class when we introduced ourselves, I said I wanted to become a world leader to create positive change in agriculture. To others, this may sound impossible, but all my professors believed I would get there and have supported me since then. I hope one day people remember my story.

“I feel like my time on earth is very valuable. I really want to leave the planet in good hands — good, sustainable, nutritious hands,” she says.

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“I’d like to go into service and figure out how I can help people living in the most extreme poverty to make their lives more sustainable. If I can help them, then I can help everyone,” she says.

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When Matt Gill met Scott Bretthauer, neither knew the introduction was the start of a long-term friendship. Bretthauer, then an extension specialist in aerial application technology, needed help in his lab, and Gill was a new student, thrilled to be offered a job that let him work around planes.

Gill has worked on and around planes since a fairly young age. He was 14 when the high school ag teacher in Rantoul, Illinois, recommended him to a crop dusting operation working out of the town’s former airbase. Gill took a job there (even though it began at 4 a.m.), and it sparked an interest in his eventual career path — aerial application.

Gill points out, “You have to be real nice to your mom if you want her to give you a ride at that time of day! I loaded fuel and chemicals, and I cleaned planes. I was just a hired hand, but I eventually had the opportunity to ride along. The first time I ever flew was in a Robinson R44; then I got to fly in an Air Tractor 802 with a second seat, my first fixed-wing flight ever. That job was a great experience, and it made me think I wanted to go into aerospace engineering.”

A meeting with Mike Hirschi, a dean in U of I’s College of Engineering, convinced Gill his interests were better suited to agricultural engineering, so in the fall of 2010 he began as a freshman in the Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering (ABE). An astute instructor introduced Gill to Bretthauer.

“Anne Marie Boone, the student academic program coordinator for the department and one of my ABE 100 instructors, learned about my background, and she immediately set me up with Scott,” Gill recalls. “I think she knew it would be a good match.”
“Matt learned what I did very quickly,” Bretthauer says. “He learned how to fit in, and he learned how to think for himself. He wasn’t just someone who did what he was told. He took initiative and did things without being asked. Every time I went down into the lab, it was reorganized. It was kind of our joke. I said it was his way to insure job security: I couldn’t fire him if I couldn’t find anything.”

But Gill says he wasn’t a big help to Bretthauer the first year. “I didn’t know that much, so it was a gradual progression,” Gill says. “But I worked with Scott every summer instead of taking an internship, because it involved me in the industry more each year.”

Bretthauer’s style of management forced Gill outside his comfort zone. “From the very beginning,” Gill says, “Scott would tell me what needed to be done, and why, but he wouldn’t tell me how. He’s even got a quote on his computer that says ‘Tell people what to do, but don’t tell them how to do it. Let them surprise you with their ingenuity.’ That gave me a lot of freedom, but it could also be a little frustrating. Google had to help me along quite a bit.”

Gill also credits Bretthauer with keeping him in ag and bio engineering. “There was a point where I got a little overwhelmed. I had a difficult class load, I was an officer in my fraternity, and I had a job. I seriously considered changing my major, but Scott said, ‘No, you’re not. You’re staying in this program. Shut up and suck it up.’ So I did.”

The two men worked closely leading fly-ins for Operation S.A.F.E. (Self-regulating Application and Flight Efficiency). These clinics teach pilots how to make sure their aerial application of pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides is safe and efficient.

“I like to analyze the aircraft and work on how the setup actually impacts the application,” Bretthauer says. “Matt’s interest lies in making improvements to the equipment we use to do that analysis.”

An example Bretthauer gives of such an improvement is changes to the lab’s fluorometer, which measures the intensity of fluorescence in spray pattern analysis.

“Matt is working with Dick Whitney, a retired professor from Oklahoma State. Whitney is building a new fluorometer, and Matt is writing a software program for it. It’s a great improvement over what we had, and it allows us to better analyze the spray patterns and keep track of the related information. Matt bugged me for two years to update it — now I wish I’d turned him loose on it a long time ago.”

In November 2013 Gill enlisted in the Illinois Air National Guard. “A week later my hometown [Gifford, Illinois] was hit by a tornado,” he says. “Picking up the pieces afterward wasn’t an experience I’d wish on anyone, but the outpouring of help within the community reminded me of why small-town America is so great.”

Gill graduated with a bachelor’s degree in ABE the following May, and he continued working with Bretthauer the summer after graduation and into the fall. A slot opened for him in basic training in November, and he spent the next year training with the Air National Guard in Texas and Illinois, then deploying to Poland. When he returned in the fall of 2015, his job was waiting for him.

Gill began graduate school last spring, and marriage is just around the corner in October. After another deployment upcoming in January, he hopes to graduate with a master’s degree the following fall.

But it will be different this time, because Bretthauer left the university in June to take a job in the private sector.

“It’s a little strange without him,” Gill concedes, “but a condition of taking his new job allowed him to complete most of the fly-ins we had scheduled. And I still work with him, but in a different capacity, on research projects at his new job.”

In the meantime, Gill is continuing down the career path he’s envisioned for so long. He conducted his first solo fly-in in June, and more are scheduled. He also gave a presentation on aerial application in Davenport, Iowa, to new representatives at BASF Corporation, a chemical company.

“For a long time, I thought school was going to teach me everything I needed to know to do my job,” Gill concludes. “Scott taught me to stop thinking that way. He said, ‘Out of everything you’re taught here, some of it will be applicable and some of it won’t. But learning how to absorb information and teach yourself, learning how to adapt, that’s why you’re here. That’s what that really expensive piece of paper means. It doesn’t mean you know everything. It means you’re capable of learning.’ I’m glad he helped me understand that.”
A newborn’s “firsts” — behavioral milestones, as when her eyes focus on and follow something or when he begins to reach for things — can be magical for a new parent.

During those early months of life, the baby’s brain is undergoing important structural development. And research is showing that nutrition plays an important role in this process.

The University of Illinois has a long history of using the neonatal piglet as a translational model to study pediatric nutrition. Renowned scientists in ACES, including Sharon Donovan in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition and Rodney Johnson in the Department of Animal Sciences, have long used the young pig to determine how nutrition influences the immune system and microbial ecology of the neonate.

Recent focus of the pig model is emphasizing the role of nutrition on brain and cognitive development. As a result of research starting in Johnson’s laboratory, the young pig is now recognized to have patterns of brain development that highly resemble the human infant.

Using such technologies as refined magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) methods, and innovative behavior testing for cognition and memory assessment, Ryan Dilger and colleagues at the Piglet Nutrition and Cognition Lab are developing methods to understand how specific ingredients affect brain development.

“We are quantifying how nutrients and bioactive components found in breast milk impact cognitive development, and whether similar effects can be achieved if these components are included in infant formula. The infant formula industry’s primary goal is to advance optimal infant nutrition. Thus, there is interest in aligning the nutrient profiles of breast milk and infant formula to help infants receive the best start in life,” Dilger says.

Most recently Dilger, an associate professor of animal sciences, and doctoral student Austin Mudd looked at a novel combination of prebiotics, milk fat globule membrane (MFGM), and lactoferrin added to a DHA- and ARA-containing formula fed to piglets. They found that the formula they studied advanced overall piglet brain development compared with a formula containing only DHA and ARA (both omega fatty acids that are now standard in infant formula).

MFGM and lactoferrin are compounds naturally present in the milk of both humans and cows. Dilger says that independently these compounds have been reported to have positive effects on brain development of rodents and piglets. The dietary prebiotics were included in the formula based on recent evidence that their impact on the intestinal microbiome has some effects on the development of the enteric and central nervous systems.

“This research builds on research that has been done over the last 15 years,” Dilger says. “We have known that DHA is good, and now we are asking how we can help DHA further support brain and eye health. This study is adding novel nutritional technologies on top of existing technologies. It’s taking a complex approach, and it’s really the combination of these ingredients that is special.”

Dilger and Mudd pulled the evidence of enhanced brain development from MRI results performed on piglets at 30 days of age after they had been fed either the test diet (supplemented) or a control diet (DHA and ARA only). The researchers also did behavioral testing of spatial memory with the piglets in a specially designed T-maze. Although they didn’t see large effects from the behavioral testing, Dilger says, they did see significant effects on brain development from the MRI results.

A finding exciting to the researchers was that the differences they observed took place in the brain’s internal capsule region (a white-matter structure of the brain). Mudd says other recent studies have shown that this region is impacted by early-life nutritional interventions.

“The internal capsule is one of the earliest maturing brain regions. It connects sensory and motor output to the rest of the body,” Mudd explains. “If you think about the early stages of development, when a baby first starts to reach for things, this could be because of the early maturing nature of the internal capsule.”

Future studies will continue to look at development in the internal capsule along with other aspects of structural development in the brain. The researchers will also test other ingredients’ effect on development and focus on developing more sensitive behavior testing.

The Piglet Nutrition Cognition Lab was installed in 2015 after Dilger was awarded funding from Mead Johnson Nutrition for the new facility. The lab enhances the ability to make new discoveries in cognitive development by using behavior to measure brain function. For more information, visit ansci.illinois.edu/labs/comparative-animal-nutrition/PNCL.

By Stephanie Henry
INTO Africa

By Debra Levey Larson
Although women comprise about three-quarters of the labor force in Uganda, they face more barriers than men do in getting resources and training opportunities. Agricultural communications professor Lulu Rodriguez is using technology to narrow the gap. Her study shows that women in rural Kamuli District learned more about row bean planting from a combination of lecture, field demonstration, and video. Watching the video alone improved women’s knowledge scores, but it did not close the gap between them and their male counterparts.

Soybean farmers in sub-Saharan Africa have access to very few plant varieties, and the ones they do have are low yielding. ACES’ Soybean Innovation Lab brought three African soybean breeders to the U of I South Farms, including Ethiopian soybean breeder Abush Tesfaye from the Jimma Agricultural Research Institute. He and his colleagues learned new soybean breeding techniques from plant geneticists Randy Nelson and Brian Diers. The collaboration is an effort to develop high-yielding, disease-resistant, African-adapted soybean varieties to improve soybean production in Africa.

Natural resources and environmental sciences researcher Daniel Miller examined the results of a multimillion-dollar European Union aid project in West Africa. Miller conducted interviews with 300 households in villages adjacent to the W National Park, which spans both Benin and Niger. People who live on the outskirts of the park sometimes sneak in to hunt, graze their animals, or even plant crops. Miller used the original data from the interviews to explain how and why the same conservation project led to different outcomes in the two national political contexts.
Zimbabwe
Crop yields in the fragile semiarid areas of Zimbabwe have been declining over time due to reduced soil fertility, the result of repeated planting of a single crop and a lack of fertilizer. Researcher Alex Winter-Nelson evaluated a precision-farming technique called “microdosing” to improve yield at a low cost to farmers. Rather than spread fertilizer over the entire field, microdosing uses small, affordable amounts of fertilizer for more efficiency and to improve productivity.

Zambia
Poor households in the Copperbelt Province in Zambia received livestock donations from Heifer International. Agricultural economist Alex Winter-Nelson found that the addition of a cow, a pair of oxen, or a herd of goats increases a household’s budget by about 25 percent. This remarkable boost lets the household spend more on higher-nutrition foods, mostly milk.

Ethiopia
Farmers, government representatives, from Ethiopia, and researchers from the Bahir Dar University participated in a workshop to launch an innovation hub at the university. The workshop is part of the ACES Appropriate Scale Mechanization Consortium efforts, led by ACES agricultural engineer Alan Hansen. Field visits showed visitors firsthand current agricultural mechanization practices in the country. A major goal is to empower women by enhancing their skills and education in using machinery. In this photo, farmers were asked for feedback about what they believe are major challenges in their smallholder farming operations.
Sky’s the limit

SHARPENING and Widening the View with Drones

By Lauren Quinn
A CES prides itself on continual innovation, so it’s no surprise that Dennis Bowman has built a reputation introducing Illinois farmers to cutting-edge technologies. It started with GPS and yield monitors in the 1990s, but today he spends much of his time demonstrating the use of drones to improve farming practices.

Bowman, a U of I Extension and Crop Systems educator, started tinkering with drones after hearing about them at a conference three years ago.

“Before drones,” he says, “we relied on ground-based scouting. I was a commercial crop scout for two seasons, and I walked a lot of fields. I know that in the middle of the summer, a crop scout is not going to make it to the end of a 160-acre field to know what’s going on. And not having to walk through a half-mile of pollinating corn on a muggy summer day has a lot of appeal to it.”

Now, with the push of a button, farmers, farm consultants, and researchers can scout an entire field in a matter of minutes, without breaking a sweat. With the proper sensors built into custom cameras, farmers can detect plant stress, calculate population density, find weeds, build 3D maps, and more.

Easy Access Sends More Drones Skyward

Having expanded beyond their original military applications, drones of many shapes and sizes are now readily available to consumers from big box stores and online outlets. Rotary styles, usually fitted with four to eight propellers, can fly straight up, making it easy to get an aerial view of a very specific location. Fixed-wing styles, resembling small airplanes, usually require a small runway or launch system for takeoff and landing. Once they’re flying, though, both rotary and fixed-wing drones can be programmed to fly in specified patterns over set areas as long as they are GPS-enabled and linked with flight software.

Cameras, often modified with sensors that can detect plant color and stress, click away during flight, sending images back to the user’s computer or handheld device.

“I can look at the iPad to see what the drone is seeing and control the camera using the screen,” Bowman says.

“Then I download the images onto my computer and run them through software that puts them together into a bigger mosaic or a 3D map. With the 3D images, you can do all kinds of calculations.”

Despite their growing popularity and accessibility, drones are highly regulated by the Federal Aviation Authority. First, the FAA requires every drone weighing more than 0.55 pounds to be registered, with a penalty of up to $250,000 for failing to do so. Second, recreational users must fly below 400 feet at all times, and they cannot profit from the use of any data that they acquire from the drone. Farmers could fall under either the recreational use or commercial use rules, depending on how they utilize the information collected.

Once the Future, Drones as Tools Have Arrived

A marked increase in registrations in recent years suggests drones are being deployed in droves. Their use in agriculture may revolutionize farming as we know it. Crop scouts could be deployed to specific problem areas identified by drones, saving farmers time and money, and insurance adjusters could use drones to obtain more accurate estimates of crop damage.

Crop scientists are also increasingly using drones to improve research efforts. For example, a number of faculty members and graduate students in the Department of Crop Sciences are using drones to visualize and analyze spatial patterns of crop yield, crop stress, weed density, and other data parameters.

Crop sciences graduate student Alex Park says, “Drones offer research scientists a spatial and temporal resolution at a scale that hasn’t been available to us before. This lets us ask some very pointed landscape-level questions across many scientific fields.”

No matter the application, “drones make a cool toy,” Bowman says. “Farmers love them. But drones also give you information. They put farmers in control.”

The future of agriculture is here, buzzing just overhead a field near you.
About one in eight preschool-aged children in the United States is obese and thus more likely as an adult to experience serious health problems, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Over the past four years, the ACES Family Resiliency Center’s STRONG Kids 2 has been working to confront this national problem. A project with potentially life-changing ramifications for children across the country, STRONG Kids 2 had relatively modest beginnings, in a visit to a windowless basement room.

During a tour on campus in the early 2000s, Doris Christopher, founder of Pampered Chef, observed programs of interest in the College of ACES. While inspired by the family-related research, Christopher was slightly surprised by the crude facilities, located in a basement. Christopher remembers, “The programs themselves were impressive, but surely we could do better than that basement.”

Her comments ignited a conversation about what these research programs could accomplish with a versatile, state-of-the-art building combining research, outreach, and education spaces dedicated solely to issues affecting families. Thus began several years of development that led to the opening of Doris Kelley Christopher Hall in 2006, described by Christopher as “a critically important component to establishing a world-class center that will be home to innovative research, education, and outreach initiatives.”

The unique combination of resources housed in Christopher Hall, now celebrating its 10th anniversary, continues to draw faculty together for novel research projects, including STRONG Kids 2. The project examines the intricate nature of childhood obesity, combining researchers from multiple disciplines to examine the causes behind weight imbalance, obesity, health behaviors, and health beliefs. According to Barbara Fiese, director of the Family Resiliency Center and a principal investigator on STRONG Kids 2, “Issues like childhood obesity are so complex that it’s necessary to approach them from multiple perspectives to ensure we’re asking questions that might not otherwise be asked.”

Approximately 400 area families have been recruited and studied over three years. Their participation involves having biological samples and height and weight measurements taken from infants and toddlers over that period. Mothers are surveyed about weaning, dietary habits, and household routines, as well as their children’s emotions, feeding styles, and milk and dairy consumption. “We’re beginning to gain unique insights into how individual biology interacts with the family environment to promote healthy eating habits in young children,” Fiese says.

The project also provides a robust learning environment for the undergraduate students who participate as research assistants. Animal sciences senior Pia Gomez, who collected biometric samples from families, jumped at the opportunity to be involved because of her passion for nutrition. “Being in STRONG Kids, I learned the overall effects that nutrition can have on a child and developed an amazing connection with the parents and children involved in it.”

One of the parents involved in STRONG Kids 2, Lindsey Alexander, was drawn to the study by the idea of examining nutritional habits at such a young age. “You never know what kids are perceiving and when,” Alexander says, “and you’d be surprised what is developing early on. This was my first child. Ultimately, you want the best for them in all aspects — health, growth — and studies like this help you achieve that.”

STRONG Kids 2 is redefining our understanding of obesity and generating potential research results that will help parents understand obesity’s complex nature — all generated by that visit to a dark basement lab.
He can still picture the exact spot in an Iowa State University hallway where Professor George Ladd sat him down to share a bit of advice: “There are a few ways to be successful in this world. One is to be a genius like me. Two is to be lucky. Three is to work really hard. I think you should try that last one, Bob.”

ACES dean Robert Hauser laughs out loud remembering that conversation with one of his mentors in agricultural economics. “I did what he told me to do,” Hauser says. “He told me to go work my tail off at Champaign, and good things would happen. And they did.”

Hauser is the first to tell you that he had no grand plan to become dean of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois. He simply tried to make the best decision with every opportunity that came his way.

As a self-proclaimed “long-haired character who thought he knew a lot more than he did,” Hauser headed off to Iowa State University after high school with dreams of becoming a veterinarian and returning to his family’s diversified grain and livestock farm. However, during that first year at Iowa State, he quickly discovered that he hated organic chemistry. But he really took to his class in economics.

“I had no idea what I was going to do with it, but I knew that I enjoyed economics, so I changed my major,” he says. “During my junior year, I started working for Professor Phil Baumel, an all-star in grain transportation. He was a huge influence in my life, and he encouraged me to pursue my doctorate.”

After graduating, Hauser had offers at several schools. He struggled with deciding where to go. Baumel gave him some valuable counsel.

“He told me to think about where the pillars of my profession were — where the real scholars were — because that would best facilitate my success,” Hauser says. “Once he put it in that context, it was easy. I knew I had to come to the University of Illinois.”

Scholarship first

Hauser jumped right into a rigorous research environment at Illinois studying transportation economics. He later moved into risk analysis/ risk management and focused on the use of commodity options. He developed friendships with several colleagues that he remains close to today.

Sally Thompson, deputy director of the Bureau of Economic Analysis in the U.S. Department of Commerce, met Hauser when she came to the Department of Agricultural Economics at Illinois as an assistant professor in 1984.

“We hit it off right away,” Thompson recalls. “Bob really is a people person and has a fabulous sense of humor. I feel fortunate that I found a good friend and colleague who could make me laugh every day, understood my work, and shared some of the same challenges.”

Thompson says Hauser’s strength as a scientist and researcher was well known and valued by the college.

“The University of Illinois has always believed in scholarship first, and Bob fit that mold,” she adds. “You can tell when some people are looking for careers in administration — but not Bob. He wasn’t one to say ‘pick me, pick me’ for everything. But when it came time to choose an active head of the department, the leadership looked to Bob, because everyone trusted him and his good judgment.”
In August 1995, Hauser was appointed interim department head; he had to make some tough administrative decisions right away. With encouragement from colleagues, Hauser threw his name in the hat when the permanent position opened up. He was chosen and served for seven years, took a two-year break, then served another five.

“Those were fun times,” Hauser remembers. “It was exciting to help with the reorganization of Ag Economics to become Agricultural and Consumer Economics [ACE]. We brought two units together that were very different thematically, culturally, and programmatically. They wanted to make it a successful merger, and it was. It was also a very flush period of support — the opportunities to fund new projects and initiatives were endless.”

During Hauser’s final year as ACE department head, he was also asked to serve the college as interim director of ACES International Affairs. A year later, he was named interim dean.

“Hauser was an experienced administrator — he did an extraordinary job leading ACE and recruiting outstanding faculty,” says Robert Easter, the university’s president emeritus. Easter, interim provost at the time Hauser was interim dean, says, “Hauser understood the values of the college and university while being well connected with the leadership of both production agriculture and Chicago-based agricultural marketing and risk management communities.”

Hauser admits he was intrigued at the opportunity to serve as interim dean and thought it would be fun — for a year. During a period of turmoil campuswide, Hauser’s ability to guide ACES through the ups and downs was noted, and he was asked to continue on in his role as dean.

Easter notes that Hauser “successfully managed the college through a difficult financial period that followed state budget reductions precipitated by the crash of 2008, including oversight of a major realignment of U of I Extension made necessary by reduced funding.”

Although his first year as interim dean was full of challenges, Hauser says, it was also a lot of fun. He was able to work with department heads that he had collaborated with for the past five years.

“I sat the heads down at our first meeting and told them we were going to learn together,” Hauser says. “I was one of them, just sitting in a different office now. We put it all out on the table — budgets, practices, etc. It was a valuable lesson on the value of transparency and bringing everyone into the conversation.”

Hauser’s transparency makes him a great leader, says Germán Bollero, head of the Department of Crop Sciences. “In times when we were cut and under scrutiny for budget and student numbers, he was always fair and extremely transparent.

“We can have very strong discussions about things — we don’t always agree — but I walk away from his office feeling like I have been treated fairly,” Bollero says.

A leader for the people

Neal Merchen, ACES associate dean of research, believes one of Hauser’s greatest contributions as dean has been creating a calming environment — “We’re going to get through this” — during a time when the college has faced real challenges.

“We’ve been under siege to operate differently, with very pressing budgetary constraints,” Merchen says. “In the midst of all that, he never allowed us to get away from thinking about how we could get better. Not just to maintain ourselves, but to get better.”

And evidence shows it has worked, Merchen says.

When Hauser became dean in 2009, ACES had 220 faculty. Today the college has 190. Despite a loss of more than 15 percent, productivity has increased significantly. The average grant revenue has grown by about 40 percent.
When Hauser’s not busy on the job, he enjoys time in nature. He says there is no shortage of work at his place in Wisconsin, where he enjoys 100 acres of pure north woods and a 40-acre lake. “I’ve always enjoyed hunting,” he says. “But more than that, I’ve enjoyed working with hunting dogs, from training to competition to judging. What’s always drawn me to hunt is my love for the dogs.”

“He has created an atmosphere and culture in our college that has resulted in us getting better — at least on a pound-for-pound basis,” Merchen says.

Hauser insists that being effective as a dean in ACES isn’t about what you know, but rather what you are willing to learn.

“There’s a misconception out there that the dean knows everything about the college,” Hauser says. “The dean may indeed know a lot from a 10,000-foot view. But ultimately the dean has to want to learn and to really listen. When I sit down at a meeting on campus, I know most of the people around me are smarter than I am. The trick is not necessarily to have your own great ideas, but to be able to find the best ideas from those around you.”

Speaking from experience, Easter couldn’t agree more.

“A key role of a dean is selecting competent, visionary leaders — department heads and associate deans,” Easter says. “With one exception, there has been a turnover of all senior leaders in ACES since my departure [as the dean before Hauser] in 2009, and each new hire is a tribute to Hauser’s ability to recruit good leaders.”

In addition to recruiting new faculty, Hauser has retained great faculty over the years, another tribute to his leadership.

“He knows how to identify excellence in others,” Merchen says. “As a leader, he thrived by making good decisions about hiring and promoting people, cultivating and nurturing talent through the allocation of limited resources, and stepping back and allowing that to grow.

“He’s the kind of leader who doesn’t micromanage. He doesn’t have to appear in every photo opp. And he doesn’t try to take credit for everything. I feel strongly that this is the legacy Bob is leaving — and he has kept ACES a good place to work.”

A tough act to follow

Hauser’s 35 years of knowing Illinois — understanding the players, the history, the campus — make him hard to follow, Bollero says. Hauser holds a deep belief in the land-grant mission and is committed to supporting basic research, turning it into solutions, and then sharing those solutions with the public.

“His number one concern when I interviewed as associate dean for research was how I felt about fulfilling the land-grant philosophy,” Merchen says. “Hauser’s roots in agriculture run deep — he has a strong appreciation for and belief in fulfilling that philosophy.”

Hauser’s loyalty to Illinois is unequivocal. If he could do it all over again, he says, there aren’t many decisions he would change.

“You never know what would have happened had you made a different choice,” Hauser adds. “The only thing I’d do over is find ways to spend more time with my kids, especially when they were little and active in school activities. I spent 24/7 working, moving to full professor and department head, while they were growing up. It was such a busy time. I look back and think, Where did it go? I’ve learned you don’t have to do it that way.”

Thinking back on his 35-year tenure in ACES, Hauser is quick to credit any successes to his team.

“I’ve been able to listen to really smart people and identify the best of their ideas,” he says. “If I’ve had any success, it’s because I’ve been able to implement those ideas.”

The relationship Hauser has developed with his department heads is unique. Bollero says Hauser always looks out for his team.

“In administration, Hauser knew what side of the fence he was on,” he says. “And you knew he’d be there. Every day. When he told you it was white, it stayed white. It wasn’t gray the next day or blue the following day. He stood by his word.”

Many believe Hauser’s success is the result of his own hard work, transparency, and practicality.

“Let me put it this way,” Bollero says. “I could spend many days in the same boat fishing with him. What you see is what you get: an honest, good friend. An Iowa farm boy. No hidden agenda. I don’t want to get mushy about this, but I can be myself around him. I don’t have to pretend to be someone I’m not.

“People can get enamored by big speeches and talks, but there’s something about Bob’s straightforwardness that goes much deeper. He’s Bob. And a lot of people appreciate him for being just that.”
If you’ve ever competed on a team, you know that the experience teaches life skills about working in a group, coping in stressful situations, communicating effectively, and winning and losing graciously. In livestock judging, team members also learn to think analytically, defend their decisions, and interact with industry leaders who could one day be their boss.

Add to the list of challenges foreign travel and overcoming culture shock and you have a glimpse of what Australian Ellen Simpson learned last spring during a semester at the University of Illinois. As winner of her country’s 2015 Angus Youth National Judging Competition, Simpson received a $10,000 scholarship to attend classes and participate on the U of I Livestock Judging Team.

The scholarship is a joint program between the ACES Department of Animal Sciences and the Angus Society of Australia. It began in 1981, when ACES animal scientist Douglas Parrett started the first national Angus judging contest for youth in Australia. The program, now sponsored by Angus Australia, brings the winning Australian student to the U of I each year. Champion judges like Simpson still come to learn about American livestock judging, culture, and agriculture, while Illinois students learn in turn from the Australians.

While on the team, Simpson found that the actual judging wasn’t very different from judging in Australia. “A good animal is a good animal,” she says. However, learning how to describe and measure “a good animal” in a new context posed challenges. Simpson had to learn American terminology and metric conversions.

Simpson’s first competition was in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where she encountered the first significant judging difference between Australia and the United States. In Australia, participants rank an animal and immediately give their reasons for the decision. They must give a detailed description of the animal, with comparisons that explain why it is better or worse than others. In the United States, team members share their oral reasons one-on-one with the contest official hours later.

**G’day, Illini!**

In addition to being on the judging team, Simpson attended courses in animal nutrition, genetics, and animal sciences. Although she wasn’t receiving college credit, she took her work as a student seriously, attending class and taking the exams.

“Without a doubt, completing the courses without the pressure of a grade was so much easier,” Simpson says. “I was able to take it all in and do well. I put in what I wanted to get out of it. I wanted to learn.”

American sorority living was another bonus. From her years at boarding school, Simpson was familiar with the unique environment created when living with a group of females. “Having those experiences 10 years ago made the transition really simple,” Simpson says. “Plus, growing up with a sister, I was used to sharing.” But in U of I’s 4-H House, Simpson brought her own uniqueness.

“I’ll miss having my accent be such a draw,” Simpson says. “I’ve never experienced anything like that in all of my travels, and it’s been hilarious. I’ll miss talking about kangaroos and Steve Irwin!”

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**COMPETITIVE LIVESTOCK JUDGING AT A GLANCE**

- **INFORMATION:** Judges develop a mental image of the ideal characteristics for a particular animal.
- **OBSERVATION:** Making accurate assessments requires a sharp mind and a good eye.
- **COMPARISON:** Evaluating livestock involves weighing the good and the bad and making analytical decisions as a result.
- **DECISION:** Judges must understand the differences and possess confidence to rank the animals.
Bigger lessons learned

Simpson’s agriculture roots, which grew in rural Australia, differ greatly from those of many rural Illinois kids. With Australian farms raising an average of 500 head of cattle and 100 sheep, the much smaller scale of Illinois agriculture was very different. Other aspects rang true, however. Simpson’s hometown in Australia faces challenges of urban sprawl and of educating consumers about agricultural practices.

Seizing the opportunity of a lifetime to come to the U of I required difficult personal and career decisions for the third-generation farmer. Simpson and her family were in the process of selling their land, hoping to move to a larger, more unified location that would make life easier for her parents. Simpson ultimately chose the semester at Illinois over accepting a full-time position as a ruminant nutritionist, her dream job.

“All of my friends are settling down, getting engaged, building houses, getting married, having babies,” Simpson says. “I’m traveling the world and experiencing new things, and that’s okay, too!”

Her philosophy is that everyone needs to choose the path that’s best for them.

“I’ve always been a firm believer in taking experiences that are offered to me,” Simpson says. “So often we concentrate on the negative, like missing out on a job opportunity, but instead we must focus on the positive that could come from a decision.”

Simpson says the United States holds a special place in her heart, and the Illini experience has helped her be more assured about her life decisions. She knows agriculture and beef cattle is the career path she wants to follow, even if she finds herself occasionally “lost in the bushes.”

As she clears her own way in life, she says, “There is no one set path. I’m bashing the sticks away, doing my own thing. And it has made all the difference.”
Embrace GREEN SPACE

Spending time together in nature benefits families

By Stephanie Henry
When life gets stressful, there is something about getting outside in green space that seems to put things back in perspective, to restore some calm to our busy lives.

Research has shown that spending time in nature — even taking just a 20-minute walk — can restore our attention. Most studies have focused on how that experience affects an individual. Would a walk down a tree-lined path have the same effect as a family activity?

ACES researchers who study families have proposed that those who get outside together regularly — to take a walk, work in the garden, go to the park, or walk the dog — may tend to function better as a family.

“When your attention is restored you’re able to pick up on social cues more easily, you feel less irritable, and you have more self-control. All of these are variables that can help you get along better with others,” explains Dina Izenstark, a family studies doctoral candidate.

After having worked as a manager in the leisure and recreation field, Izenstark teamed up with Aaron Ebata, an associate professor and extension specialist in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), to study how leisure activities in nature affect the family. “Although I enjoyed the field of recreation, I was most interested in how children and families were developing in these leisure contexts,” Izenstark says.

Ebata’s interest has been in supporting families undergoing stress: “the kind of stress that comes from normal developmental changes like having a teenager or a toddler,” he says, “or from having a child with a challenge or disability like autism. One of the things I was interested in, but had put in the back of my mind, was how nature impacts that stress.”

Ebata says their theory about nature and the family was inspired by and builds upon groundbreaking work by Ming Kuo, an ACES associate professor in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (NRES), Andrea Faber Taylor, a teaching associate in NRES, and Bill Sullivan, a U of I professor of landscape architecture and an NRES affiliate.

Kuo and Faber Taylor’s early work identified physical, psychological, and social benefits for individuals who had greater exposure to green space. They found that women who lived in apartments with trees or greenery immediately outside were more effective and procrastinated less when dealing with major life issues. Test scores also showed that they were able to concentrate better. Another study found that exposure to nature can have positive effects on children with attention deficit disorder.

More recently Kuo reviewed hundreds of studies to understand how exposure to green space leads to better health. She concluded that nature can enhance the functioning of the body’s immune system. Kuo explains that spending time in nature switches the body into “rest and digest” mode as opposed to “fight or flight.” In “fight or flight” mode, the body shuts down everything that is immediately nonessential, including the immune system. When we are in nature and relaxed, Kuo says, the body knows it is safe and can use resources for the immune system.

Together, Izenstark and Ebata hope to understand how family relationships are affected by nature, using the frameworks of attention restoration theory and family routines and rituals perspective. Attention restoration theory, first developed by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, describes how interaction with natural environments can reduce mental fatigue and restore attentional functioning. Izenstark and Ebata’s goal was to develop a new theoretical approach to studying the benefits of family-based nature activities.

One important thing they propose is that spending time in nature benefits family functioning more than a day at an amusement park or watching TV together. But why?

Izenstark explains, “There is a growing body of literature that utilizes attention restoration theory to show how exposure to nature can restore attentional functioning. Kaplan and Kaplan propose that the natural environment is a unique context because it often has the four characteristics that encourage restored attention: being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility.

“Everyone only has a finite amount of attention. Especially in today’s society where we are constantly looking at our cellphones or working on our computers and our email keeps popping up, we are constantly fatiguing our directed attention. But we’re not always aware that we’re doing it. It’s so important that we incorporate moments...
into our everyday lives when we can look into nature and experience soft fascination to restore our attention. When you’re at an amusement park or watching a sporting event, you’re using your hard fascination. Your brain does not have the opportunity to relax or restore itself. Even though you enjoy the activity, it’s still fatiguing you.

The concept of feeling like one is getting away from the day-to-day also benefits the family. “Coming from my own experience,” he says, “when you are a parent, especially with young active children, and you’re feeling a little stressed, there is something helpful about going to a park and letting the kids run off so you can take a breath and watch them have fun.

“When you’re home and still in charge,” Ebata notes, “that doesn’t feel like being away. But there is something about natural places that almost releases parents from feeling like they are on duty in the same way they are at home. They are still responsible, but maybe in a less stressful way.”

So in addition to confirming nature’s ability to restore attention, which in turn helps family members get along better, the researchers have seen how important it is for families to have regular nature-based routines or rituals. A common example they used in their study of families was walking the dog together on the same day every week. This might be a simple activity, but it is one that brings a sense of belonging and identity to family members, the researchers say.

Ultimately, being able to communicate “who we are” to each other through family routines and rituals also helps with family functioning.

“Say a family goes to a park every Sunday. Looking at the long-term effects of family-based nature activities, you will see over time that the experience can foster a sense of identity and belonging. Because they go regularly or repeatedly, it’s a family ritual, and in addition to the benefits of short-term exposure enjoyed during visits, the family has a shared experience which helps make them who they are as a family, something that can be passed down through generations,” Izenstark explains. “Even if you have a bad day during a visit — say you get rained on and everyone gets soaked — the total benefit of that ritual for the family becomes larger than just individual, short-term benefits. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.”

Ebata recognizes that some families just don’t like to be outside. “There is research that shows that families that spend time in joint activities tend to have better relationships later on. But people tend to lump any kind of activity together, including watching TV,” Ebata says. “We would argue that if you only watch TV together, that may not be as beneficial for the relationship as other kinds of more interactive activities. I have recommended watching TV together really as a stimulus for being able to talk to each other about different types of things. If that goes together, it can enhance relationships.

“There’s this notion that watching TV is relaxing. All the research we know shows that in fact it may not be as restorative as other activities.”

Although the researchers agree that many different types of leisure activities are associated with a variety of functioning outcomes, they hope to show that activities in nature go above and beyond any other type of context. “Leisure is one of the few times families spend time together today. We want to encourage families that if you only have 20 minutes to spend together, maybe you should go take a walk in nature together as opposed to watching a television program. Take advantage of the time intervals that you have together,” Izenstark says.

Izenstark has expanded on her nature and family research in a recent study with HDFS professor Ramona Oswald looking at how low-income mothers in rural areas rely on outdoor activities to promote health for the family. Unfortunately, the mothers don’t always have access to the resources in their community due to financial and other constraints.

Izenstark is currently testing their theory about nature and family functioning. In a new experiment, moms and daughters are asked to take a 20-minute walk at the mall, as well as a 20-minute walk at the park. Izenstark is studying whether attention is better restored by the walk at the park and whether the mom and daughter displayed better family functioning after walking in the park.
Father-and-son farming partners Gerald and Reid Thompson are years apart in age, but there is no generation gap between them when it comes to understanding the benefits of technology in farming. Both believe that the tools on ACES’ farmdoc website and the information in the posts on farmdoc daily are vital to making sound management decisions.

Reid follows farmdoc daily on Twitter and reads all of the posts relevant to the operations he manages. “The farmdoc site does a lot with enterprise analysis, for example, comparing corn-on-corn versus first-year corn following soybeans. Based on that information and profitability we switched about 10 percent of our acres from corn to soybeans this year,” Reid says.

ACES agricultural economist Scott Irwin hatched the idea for farmdoc daily in 2011. It would be a spinoff of the already popular farmdoc website with daily blog-style posts about farm economics. The information would be packaged in a format easy for farmers to read on their smartphones and tablets.

“By 2010, the smartphone/tablet revolution was in full swing, and blogs and 24/7 news sites were gaining popularity,” Irwin says. “Farmers were using their smartphones as portable offices. The technology met their needs because they could get important information without being tied to a desk.”

Irwin knew it was risky for an academic unit to create a monster that had to be fed every day. Convincing his team it could be done was the first step.

“As director of the farmdoc project, I believe it’s important that all decisions are unanimous,” Irwin says. “When I described the idea, you could have heard a pin drop. Everyone just blinked and asked, ‘Do you really think we can pull off publishing every day?’ — because we hadn’t come close to that with the old farmdoc site.

“A few people said that they really liked the idea but thought it would never work, that we couldn’t supply that volume of high-quality articles. I worried about that an awful lot. And in that first year, there were some pretty shaky times getting the articles generated. A few times I’ve had to write quickly to fill in when someone couldn’t meet the deadline, but that hasn’t happened very often.”

Irwin says he intentionally wanted the word “daily” in the title to communicate the frequency up front and “tie the team to the mast.” The articles go out to subscribers by email and on Twitter.

Gerald says the farmdoc tools help him make management decisions from season to season. Reid likes that it’s not only professors from ACES who write the farmdoc daily articles.

“When they bring in outside sources from other universities like Purdue and Iowa State, it adds another level of credibility to their research and the data they produce,” Reid says. “It gives us a bigger picture, too, by including information about livestock and renewable fuels.

“And when the Farm Bill came out in 2014, the farmdoc daily articles summarized what potential payments might look like in different situations. All of the farms I manage are different, so I used the FAST tools on farmdoc to make a decision farm by farm. It provided a nice umbrella of what I needed to make intelligent decisions.”

The farmdoc team includes 13 faculty and staff members from ACES; Chris Hurt from Purdue, who submits posts on livestock economics; and Carl Zulauf from Ohio State, who is a policy specialist. Project coordinator Mark Althouse is assisted by Hongxia Jiao.

“We’d like to attract a few more authors who are outside of this department to write on special topics,” Irwin says. “The project has two corporate sponsorships — TIAA-CREF and Farm Credit — to help provide the base funding.”

Reid says the information he and his dad get from farmdoc helps them gauge how well they’re doing throughout the season.

“It tells us the real cost of putting in an acre of corn,” Reid says. “It provides a benchmark for our own operation so we can see how we’re doing compared to other farmers.”

By Debra Levey Larson
Before the first ACES Global Academy visited Mexico 10 years ago, only 1 in 5 ACES faculty was engaged internationally. Today, more than half collaborate internationally, thanks in part to a program that has positioned ACES to help solve the world’s biggest challenges.

Alex Winter-Nelson, director of the ACES Office of International Programs (OIP), explains: “When you think about today’s critical challenges — climate change, food security, water security — the work to solve them needs to be interdisciplinary and international. But this means a degree of difficulty is added, even if only because of travel, differences in culture, language, vocabulary, etc. By building international partnerships and supporting international engagements, the Global Academy makes it easier for faculty to do this essential work.”

Each fall, the ACES Global Academy inducts a new cohort of scholars, ideally at least one faculty member from each department and U of I Extension. The scholars have a desire to gain significant international experience and a commitment to complete the program.

“The scholars, nominated by their department heads, commit to monthly meetings and two trips — one to Washington, DC, and a capstone international immersion experience. In DC we network and engage with agencies and organizations that promote and support international agriculture programs, including USAID, NIFA, and FAO. The immersion experience forges professional connections between our faculty and university cultures,” says Suzana Palaska, OIP associate director, who manages the program.
In 2006, at a time when the college aimed to reinvigorate its international activities, a generous gift from Arlys Conrad, who was passionate about international education, allowed for the creation of the Global Academy.

“The goal at the time was for our faculty to see how work related to food and agriculture at a land-grant university fit into the global economy,” remembers Rich Vogen, director of planning and resource development for ACES, who helped implement the Global Academy.

Since the inaugural academy’s visit to Mexico in 2006, the capstone immersion trips have included Europe, Brazil, China, India, Ghana, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The most recent group of scholars returned to Mexico to deepen ties with existing partners.

Among the program’s success stories are a partnership with China’s Jilin University that increased maize yields, an outcome of the 2009 academy’s visit; and “Up Amigos,” a multidisciplinary investigation of genetics, obesity, and socio-environmental factors, an outcome of the first trip to Mexico.

From a broad perspective, the Global Academy has succeeded in mainstreaming international work in the college.

In addition, it’s building partnerships at the college level while building the capacity of the individual faculty member.

Jan Brooks, a 2012 participant, says, “This opportunity impacted me as an instructor, increased my confidence, and grew my commitment to making our students better global citizens.”

Alumni of the Global Academy have reported numerous positive impacts on a personal level, including continued collaborations, papers published, course material revised, and even grants received.

The Global Academy has recently been recognized among its peer institutions; it was highlighted by the Board of International Food and Agricultural Development, and the program has been adopted and adapted at other universities.

But, as Winter-Nelson notes, “Few universities can implement programs like ours because it is rare to have the financial resources of an Arlys Conrad gift or a staff with the same experience, dedication, and attention to detail. Suzana Palaska has developed meaningful programs and has organized complex trips to interact with appropriate counterparts, while coping with barriers of language, bureaucracies, time zones, and more. The payoff is a more globally competent faculty, better positioned to address the most pressing issues of our time.”

**ACADEMY RETURNS TO MEXICO**

To commemorate the program’s 10-year anniversary, last year’s group returned to Mexico, with an ambitious itinerary that included visits to four strategic partners.

The scholars, together with some past participants and ACES dean Robert Hauser, associate dean George Czapar, and assistant dean Elvira de Mejia, visited the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), the Autonomous University of Queretaro, and the Autonomous University of San Luis Potosi (UASLP).

“The evolution of ACES’ relationship with these institutions is a testament to the power of the Global Academy. We have become more strategic with our visits over time,” Palaska says.

The delegation’s first stop was CIMMYT, one of the 15 members of the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR).

“This visit was in line with the college’s goal to strengthen its relationship with CGIAR centers. Last year the academy visited the International Rice Research Institute, in the Philippines. In addition to maize and wheat, CIMMYT is working on nutrition, gender, and youth projects. We foresee some interesting partnerships,” Palaska says.

Next the delegation visited UNAM, the oldest and largest university in Mexico. Since 2006 UNAM has become an important partner for ACES; additional faculty connections were made on this visit, and options including student and faculty exchanges were discussed.

Finally, during visits to Queretaro and UASLP, the ACES delegation engaged with growing universities with strong foreseeable opportunities that will include needs for engineering and other expertise.

“Especially with UNAM and UASLP, we foresee ACES as a facilitator of multidimensional, university-level collaborations,” Palaska says.

Over its 10 years, the Global Academy has helped ACES build a culture for international work and a foundation of partnerships to enable our faculty to address some of the most formidable challenges of our time.

For more information, visit [go.illinois.edu/globalacademy](http://go.illinois.edu/globalacademy).
“Opportunity finds you when you are enthusiastically doing the work.” This is one of many quotes that motivates Dawn Jackson Blatner, RDN (registered dietitian nutritionist), ’97 FSHN. For nearly two decades, she was taking joy in helping people live healthy, she says, when reality television show producers contacted her.

Blatner was reluctant to audition, concerned that a science-based professional did not belong on reality TV. But thinking of that quote, she decided to embrace the opportunity that found her.

She moved to Atlanta for two months to film “My Diet Is Better Than Yours.” Each week, she spent two days coaching Jasmin Queen, one of the show’s five contestants; two more days involved group fitness challenges and weigh-ins. Interviews, planning for future episodes, and additional coaching sessions rounded out Blatner’s weeks.

Blatner and Queen signed an “attitude contract” created by Blatner at the beginning of the competition. “We are both human, and we could have tripped up, comparing ourselves to others doing the competition,” Blatner says.

“Making sure we were having fun and staying true to a good attitude and successful mindset were parts of what made the experience such a blast.”

Keeping things fun was just one factor in their success. Blatner was confident in her knowledge and experience as the only registered dietitian nutritionist participating as a coach on the show. “I knew I could stick to the scientific facts,” she says. “I didn’t need fads or weird rules. The basic science can prevail.” Prevail it did. Queen won the reality show, with Blatner’s guidance, using the “Superfood Swap.”

According to Justine Karduck, director of ACES’ didactic program in dietetics, “Dawn’s success is based partly on her rigorous training and credentials as a registered dietitian and her expert use of scientific evidence to devise a meal plan that works.”

Although the show’s title references a “diet,” Blatner refers to the plan she uses with clients and used in coaching Queen as more of a lifestyle than a diet. Of the several aspects that the Superfood Swap involves, the most important is asking “What do you want to eat?”

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“Making sure we were having fun and staying true to a good attitude and successful mindset were parts of what made the experience such a blast.”

Keeping things fun was just one factor in their success. Blatner was confident in her knowledge and experience as the only registered dietitian nutritionist participating as a coach on the show. “I knew I could stick to the scientific facts,” she says. “I didn’t need fads or weird rules. The basic science can prevail.” Prevail it did. Queen won the reality show, with Blatner’s guidance, using the “Superfood Swap.”

According to Justine Karduck, director of ACES’ didactic program in dietetics, “Dawn’s success is based partly on her rigorous training and credentials as a registered dietitian and her expert use of scientific evidence to devise a meal plan that works.”

Although the show’s title references a “diet,” Blatner refers to the plan she uses with clients and used in coaching Queen as more of a lifestyle than a diet. Of the several aspects that the Superfood Swap involves, the most important is asking “What do you want to eat?”
“I have a signature style I use with almost all my clients,” Blatner says. “It is want, balance, swap.” Her clients, including Queen, make a grocery list reflecting what they want to eat — the want. They don’t need to follow a specific food list or look up what they can eat. This approach provides sticking power, Blatner adds.

The balance component addresses appropriate serving sizes and food ratios. “I use the science behind the USDA MyPlate — rebranded to the Superfood Swap ratio plate — to create a reasonable ratio of the food a client wants with another healthy food,” Blatner says. “Even if it is fried chicken they are craving, they can have it, in the right serving size.”

Karduck says, “USDA’s MyPlate, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and Healthy People 2020 all contain nutrition guidelines that serve as the foundation of dietetics practice based on robust scientific evidence.”

Blatner reinforces the plate ratio with the practice of “visual wisdom,” the ability to look at a plate of food and know if it is too much for you.

Though this approach can be too much freedom for some, Blatner adds that a plate divided into three compartments can be helpful. Two smaller compartments are for one small protein and one small grain. The large compartment should contain produce with a small amount of good fat, such as nuts, seeds, or a dressing.

The swap aspect is where the rubber meets the road, Blatner says. “After determining what to eat and how much, I question the client about what can be done at home to make her or his craving more nutritional,” she says. “If the food consumed is at the next quality level, it will most definitely give a boost of nutrition.”

Reinforcing the nutrition of the Superfood Swap is extremely important to Blatner. “A good piece of advice is that if something really irritates you in the world, you should do something about it,” she says. “The idea of just counting calories has always bothered me. Yes, it is true that reducing calories does help people lose weight. However, you have to think about nourishing your body, too.”

To help Queen and others eat healthy, Blatner uses the acronym CRAP to help individuals identify overly processed foods. Excessive processing may remove helpful nutrients and replace them with something less healthy, she says. C stands for chemicals you don’t use in your own kitchen. R references refined sugars and flour, often referred to as “white stuff.” Artificial sweeteners, flavors, and colors are the A, and preservatives are the P. Not all processed foods are bad, Blatner observes. The easily remembered CRAP acronym simply calls attention to some identifiers of possibly overprocessed, less nutritious foods.

The Superfood Swap includes a few other behavior-based practices. “Table, plate, and chair are the three things you need every single time you eat,” Blatner says. This makes people less likely to eat in front of the refrigerator or television, she notes.

Sweets, treats, and alcohol are for enjoying with others, Blatner says. “That chocolate cake you eat at a birthday party while having fun with others is the same one you eat in misery at home,” she says. “You don’t have to feel deprived or guilty.”

Karduck adds that registered dietitians have a motto that “all foods can fit in a healthy balanced diet.”

Blatner agrees and adds, “And of course some foods are more nutritious than others, so my approach is to teach fun ways to incorporate healthier versions of favorite foods.

“It’s not just about losing weight, it’s about losing the lifestyle and mindset that gets someone there,” she says. “In addition to referencing science-based facts, to truly help people lose weight I’ve got to address their life holistically, including how they think and feel.”

Karduck explains that dietetics students learn and apply behavioral theories and techniques. “Most Americans ‘know’ they should eat more fruits and vegetables and less fat, sodium, and highly processed foods, but they don’t,” Karduck says. “Dietetics is grounded in behavior theory, and dietitians use the field of psychology to help understand, process, and counsel patients to eat better.”

Blatner’s plan will be published in a book, Superfood Swap: The 4-Week Plan to Eat What You Crave Without CRAP. Featuring recipes and cravings swaps, it details “a very fun way to think about the quality of your food and losing weight and getting healthy along the way,” Blatner says.

Her life is not that different after being on “My Diet Is Better than Yours,” Blatner says, but she certainly has more eyes watching her. She continues to say yes to the opportunities that excite her. One of those is sharing her experiences with dietetic students at the University of Illinois. She reminds them that opportunities will also find them if they are enthusiastically doing the work, whatever that might be.
This year the ACES Alumni Association celebrates 60 years of inspiring meaningful engagement and advocacy among the ACES family in order to advance the college. Among its many efforts, the association recognizes outstanding alumni annually with awards and plans activities across the country and even internationally to strengthen relationships between alumni and the college.

The Pioneer Hi-Bred Hugh Morrison Award was given to Clayton Carley, a senior in agricultural education, in recognition of his academic record, leadership, and demonstrated commitment to agriculture.

At the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture annual conference, ACES faculty Jill Craft, Ryan Dilger, and Dave Rosch received NACTA Educator Awards, recognizing the best in agricultural higher education.

Brian Diers, professor of plant breeding, has been named the Charles Adlai Ewing Endowed Chair in Soybean Molecular Biology, supported by a fund established by Mary Ewing Henderson to honor the memory of her father, an agricultural economist who carried on considerable research.

Ryan Dilger, associate professor of animal sciences, received the Outstanding Young Researcher Award from the American Society of Animal Science at the 2016 meeting of the group’s Midwestern Section. Also honored by the ASAS Midwestern Section was Caroline Gonzalez, who received the 2016 Stahly/Peo Outstanding Swine Nutrition Graduate Student Award.

Natural resources and environmental sciences graduate student Brett Dorak received the Best Master’s Student Paper Award from the Illinois Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

After serving as head of the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, Paul Ellinger became the university’s vice provost for budget and resource planning in April. As chief financial officer, Ellinger will guide the campus in areas related to budget, finance, planning, and resource allocation and provide leadership and management of the campus budget.

Philip Garcia, professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, was honored by the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association with its Distinguished Graduate Teaching Award.

A NASA career award, designed to support outstanding research and career development of scientists and engineers at the early stage of their careers, was received by Kiyu Guan, an assistant professor in ecohydrology and geoinformatics. Guan’s project, one of 22 chosen from 115 entries, was selected for the New (Early Career) Investigator Program in Earth Science. Guan proposes to use the novel satellite information from plant fluorescence to improve crop monitoring and yield estimation for the U.S. and Brazil.

In recognition of her continuous contributions to advancing the field, Madhu Khanna, professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, has been named a Fellow by the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association.

Reed Larson, professor of human development and family studies, was honored with the 2016 John P. Hill Memorial Award from the Society for Research on Adolescence. The award recognizes a professional whose overall program of research has had a significant impact on our understanding of development and behavior during the second decade of the lifespan.

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.
Human development and family studies graduate student Katie Magerko received the 2016 Campus Award for Excellence in Public Engagement.

Caitlin McClure, a junior in agricultural communications, won the 2016 NextRadio and Intercollegiate Broadcasting System College Radio Spot Contest. Her spot was featured in the NextRadio National Awareness Campaign to promote the activation of FM chips in all smartphones.

Elvira de Mejia, professor of food science, received the 2015 Sheth Distinguished Faculty Award for International Achievement from the Illinois International Programs Office.

At the June national conference of the National Agricultural Alumni Development Association, ACES alum Tara Anderson received the Jane Longley-Cook Volunteer Service Award for her contributions to NAADA. In the Publications and Projects Contest — the organization’s largest ever to date — the college had a powerful presence and brought home five awards:

1ST PLACE
Campaign/Series: #ACESstory
Events/Programming: ACES Family Academies

2ND PLACE
Multimedia/Websites: Human Development and Family Studies website
Multimedia/Posters, Flyers, Ads: ACES Banners
Print Media/Recruitment and Solicitation: ACES Transfer Guide

Michael Plewa, emeritus professor of genetics, was named the 2016–2018 Phi Kappa Phi Scholar in recognition of his research and publications in environmental and molecular mutagenesis.

Shelly Schmidt, professor of food chemistry, was given the 2016 Campus Award for Excellence in Graduate and Professional Teaching by the U of I Office of the Provost.

Agriculture Future of America has selected Sarah Sellsars, a junior in agricultural economics, as a campus ambassador for the organization to serve as a liaison between AFA and the University of Illinois.

The 2016 Bioenergy Society of Singapore (BESS) Achievement Award was made to Vijay Singh, professor of food and bioprocess engineering and associate director of the Integrated Bioprocessing Research Laboratory (IBRL), and Deepak Kumar, a postdoctoral fellow at IBRL. The award recognizes the importance of research on bio-energy and bio-based chemicals. It was given to Singh and Kumar for their contributions to biofuels research, in particular their paper “Metabolic Engineering to Minimize Enzymes’ Use in Biofuels Production.”

The Ainsworth Professorship in Crop Sciences has been awarded to Pat Transel. Dr. Thomas C. Ainsworth made the gift that funds the professorship to help assure that future generations of faculty and students will be able to reach their potential and improve humankind’s ability to feed, clothe, shelter, and fuel the world.

Jamison Watson, who recently received his master’s degree in agricultural and biological engineering, was one of 10 U of I students named a Fulbright Scholar for 2016–17. Watson will conduct renewable energy research at China Agricultural University in Beijing; he plans to continue his education at Illinois in a PhD program after his Fulbright year.

Four new faculty have joined the College of ACES this year:

Girish Choudhary, Agricultural and Biological Engineering

Josh McCann, Animal Sciences

Anna Parker, Food Science and Human Nutrition

Kaiyu Guan, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

37 Years of Dedication

Laurie Kramer, professor emeritus of applied family studies, has retired after 37 years of teaching and nine years as the college’s associate dean for academic programs. Her research focused on the mechanisms by which young children can develop positive relationships with their siblings. She received numerous acknowledgments for the quality of her work, most recently the Distinguished Educator Award from the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture. Not yet ready to give up her work with students, Kramer became director of the campus honors program at Boston’s Northeastern University in June.
What little kid doesn’t dream about going to the White House someday? For ACES alum Camille Range (third from left above), this dream became a reality when she accepted a summer internship working in the office of the First Lady last year.

Range always knew she wanted to be an Illini. Some would argue it’s simply part of her DNA. Both of her parents, Perry and Ramona Range, and her older sister, Ardrenee, attended the University of Illinois. Her father was a shooting guard for the men’s basketball team from 1978 to 1982 and graduated with a degree in program management in Applied Health Sciences. Her mother graduated with a degree in finance and her sister with one in textile marketing. Range’s brother, Malcolm, is a junior in technical systems management.

This rich family heritage, combined with Range’s exposure to the College of ACES through the Research Apprentice Program (RAP) in high school, made for an easy decision to come to Illinois to study food science and human nutrition.

As a RAP participant, Range worked with doctoral students focused on improving the human diet to help prevent cardiovascular disease.

“I was exposed to the world of research through literature reviews, lab experiments, and presenting the research findings,” she says. “My RAP experience opened my eyes to the field of nutrition and the research process in an academic setting.”

Jesse Thompson, assistant dean for academic programs, says RAP provides high school sophomores and juniors of urban residence an opportunity to work with ACES researchers and introduces them to the various educational paths ACES has to offer.

“Camille is a part of a legacy of family members who have participated in RAP and left a big impact on the college,” Thompson says. Her younger sister, Melanie, attended RAP II this past summer.

After Range came to the U of I, her passion for human nutrition and dietetics grew. She assisted in Margarita Teran-Garcia’s lab during most of her undergraduate career, exploring the dietary patterns of Hispanic college students and the prevalence of obesity and metabolic syndrome among them. During her senior year, she was involved with nutrition education through 4-H and University of Illinois Extension.

“I created an afterschool program for middle-school girls to learn how to use recipes and cook simple foods,” Range says. “We would also do simple fitness videos like yoga or belly dancing. I wanted the girls to realize these activities were things they could take home and do with their families. From this experience, I knew that I wanted to work with younger people to teach them to take responsibility for their health.”

After her extension experience, Range set her sights on working for Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! campaign.

“It started out as a joke — until I started filling out the application,” she says. “I began to think, ‘Let’s try to actually make this happen.’ ”

In May 2015, Range received the phone call — she was offered the Let’s Move! summer internship position in the office of the First Lady.

“The day I met the First Lady was so incredible; I will never forget how encouraging she was,” Range says.
“She thanked me for my service and everything I was doing to help the office. She said she was proud of me. That was a great moment that encouraged me to keep achieving my goals. It was also a humbling experience, and one that will resonate with me for a very long time.”

During her internship, Range worked primarily with office management, including tasks such as drafting posts for the Let’s Move! blog, attending nutrition policy meetings, conducting email correspondence, creating the director’s schedule, and scheduling the rest of the office staff.

“I learned a lot from doing those basic office tasks, because my professional skills had to be at 100 percent all of the time. I was corresponding with people across the nation who wanted to be involved in the campaign,” she says.

“By attending such a large campus like Illinois, I was really able to thrive at prioritizing my time for the right things, and I believe that helped me excel during my time at the White House.”

Range was also responsible for helping coordinate multiple events. Her favorite was the first White House campout.

“The First Lady invited the Girl Scouts of America to come and camp out on the South Lawn,” she says. “It was the 100th anniversary of the national parks as well as the 100th anniversary of the Girl Scouts. The White House South Lawn happens to be a national park, so Mrs. Obama made it possible for about 50 fifth-grade girls to get their camping badges there.”

The internship program hosts a speaker series, where government officials address the interns about their career paths and answer questions. Range had the opportunity to hear the President, the First Lady, and the Vice President speak throughout her summer.

Thompson speaks highly of Range and her accomplishments.

“It has been exciting after all of the work, planning, research, and writing she went through at Illinois to see her accomplish something like this,” he says. “Her story speaks volumes to what College of ACES students can achieve.”

Following her experience in the White House, Range completed her final year of the Master’s of Public Health and Dietetic Internship at the University of Texas Health Science Center.

“This experience was something that I put my mind to and took seriously and really applied myself to,” Range says. “Now I always encourage my mentees and my brother and sisters that you can do anything you set your mind to.”

Her brother Malcolm says his sister is goal-oriented and excels at whatever she sets out to do.

“She sets a goal, and she pursues it until she achieves it,” Malcolm says. “She has a board in her apartment that lists her goals and what she needs to do to achieve them. It has motivated me to set goals for myself and see where it can take me.”

Range is now back in Washington, DC, where she plans to use her Illini passion for research, creation, and service to achieve a new life-changing goal. She was just named director-at-large for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Foundation and serves as the 2015-17 diversity leader.

“Looking ahead to my future, I know I want to pursue a PhD. The experience I had at the White House allowed me to take a step back and look at all the options that will allow me to tackle childhood obesity,” she says. “I want to teach the next generation the importance of nutrition and health on your personal state of wealth and equip dietitians with the skills to lead the public in achieving these goals.”

“The experience I had at the White House allowed me to take a step back and look at all the options that will allow me to tackle childhood obesity.
The College of ACES Alumni Association has had an exciting year. I am proud to share some of the highlights as I complete my term as president in December. Our board continues to excel as we seek opportunities to engage our alumni. I thank all of the proud alums of the University of Illinois and the College of ACES.

Top 10 highlights:
1. In our strategic planning session, the board reviewed and set new goals for 2016–18, with priorities focusing on alumni engagement, awards and recognition, engaging students, and fundraising.
2. Three ACES in Places events were hosted in Peoria, Chicago, and Joliet.
3. A regional Big Ten Ag Alumni event took place in Washington, DC.
4. We recognized four ACES Award of Merit winners, three Young Alumni Award winners, and Family Spirit award winners. The board also assisted in developing the new Friend of ACES award that will be given by the college.
5. We added two positions to our ACES Alumni Board of Directors: Ag Communications Vocational Director and Agricultural Education Vocational Director.
6. Our new ACES Alumni website (acesalumni.illinois.edu) promotes our events and activities to our alumni base.
7. Six e-alum report newsletters were sent to over 16,000 college alumni and friends.
8. The first ACES Family Academies took place in July 2015, involving alumni and their grandchildren, children, and nieces/nephews in educational learning experiences.
9. We participated in numerous College of ACES events, including the booth at Farm Progress Show, the Career Fair, and Salute to Ag Day.
10. As hosts of the college’s Tassel Turn, we celebrated the accomplishment of ACES graduates with them and their guests.

We hope you will take the opportunity to be an engaged alum of the College of ACES and find a way to “give back” to the college — with your time, talent, or treasure. To view our annual report, visit go.aces.illinois.edu/acesalumnianualreport.

2016 Award of Merit Winners

Congratulations to the most recent group of ACES Award of Merit winners, who have brought honor and distinction to themselves and their alma mater in many ways. The College of ACES celebrated their accomplishments on April 11.

From left: Robert Gustafson, Scott McAdam, Jim Shearl, Donna Greene.
ON THE HORIZON

September 10 :: ACES College Connection & Salute to Ag Day
September 23 :: ACES Alumni Board of Directors Meeting
October 6 :: Christopher Hall 10th Anniversary Celebration
October 7–8 :: U of I Foundation Weekend
October 15 :: ACES Award of Merit Nominations Due
October 28–30 :: U of I Homecoming Weekend
December 2 :: ACES Alumni Board of Directors Meeting

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

Congratulations, Graduates

Over 700 students were welcomed to ACES alumni status last spring. On May 15, the ACES Alumni Association hosted the college’s Tassel Turn reception for graduating seniors and their families. More than 1,500 people attended the reception at the Colonnades Club in Memorial Stadium. Congratulations to the new grads! We look forward to staying in touch with you.

2016 marks the 60th anniversary of the ACES Alumni Association! Help commemorate this special anniversary and support our alumni activities and programming with “$60 for 60.” Visit our website and watch for more information about this effort coming soon.

ACES E-Alum Report

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.

ACES Alumni Class Notes

The College of ACES Alumni Association would love to hear from you! We are interested in keeping you connected to your alma mater and sharing updates (marriages, deaths, family changes, and achievements) to be shared in the ACES Alumni Class Notes online. You may also use this form to update your personal information so we can keep in touch with you.

ACES College Connection

Join us as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the ACES Alumni Association and recognize outstanding ACES award winners on September 10, 11:30 a.m., at the Hilton Hotel and Conference Center, Champaign. Registration can be found online at acesalumni.illinois.edu.

ACES Alumni Class Notes

We were thrilled to host over 90 alumni on campus for the second ACES Family Academies program. Alumni brought youth ages 8 to 13 to campus to experience hands-on educational programs, live in the dorms, eat in the dining hall, and share some favorite Illini memories together.

STAY CONNECTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

ACESAlum and UofCollegeofACES
ACESAlumni
ACESAlumni
ACESAlumniLinkedIn
The sounds of the bell tower near the ACES library welcome students to campus after their summer adventures. Students arrive with a refreshed perspective, ready to dive into the year ahead.