



Summer 2009

Featured in this newsletter are John Braden, the Department's Undergraduate Program Director and Alex Winter-Nelson, the Graduate Program Director. Both of these programs are in better shape than ever because of their leadership. Our students, as well as our faculty and staff, are very fortunate to have Alex and John at the helm, and we are most appreciative.

Robert J. Hauser
Former Head, Department of ACE
Interim Dean, College of ACES

Some "departing" thoughts

At the beginning of the summer, my plan was to write a long, reflective piece on the Department and its bright future. However, as Interim Dean, I'm now having trouble finding time to even think, let alone write something of any meaningfully reflective value. That's probably best for all.

I would, however, like to note that I am extremely honored and pleased to help the College during this time of administrative transition. ACES is one of the premier land-grant colleges in the country due in no small part to Dean Easter's tireless leadership over the past decade. His move to the Provost's office is, of course, a big loss for the College, creating the huge challenge of finding someone to fill some awfully big shoes.

As we search for a new Dean, the College's research, outreach and teaching programs will continue down the path that Dean Easter set – one of global preeminence while maintaining local relevance. This balance between quality and significance reflects a land-grant mission that is entrenched in the College. It is a well-defined and correctly-defined path.

To put my interim-dean position in context, I have little desire to be the next permanent dean, and I look forward to returning to the Department after this stint. In the meantime, however, I with many colleagues and particularly with the Department Heads and Associate Deans will try to keep on top of some very important fiscal, programmatic, and personnel issues. I do not expect many dull times.

Go Cubs,

Bob

Awards and Recognitions

- Laurian Unnevehr received the AAEE Fellow Award a couple weeks ago in Milwaukee. This is certainly the highest honor of the AAEE, and is bestowed to the very small percentage of its members who have excelled in research, extension, and/or student programs. Laurian began her professorial career at the University of Illinois in 1985. A few, but far from all, highlights of her career include AAEE's Publication of Enduring Quality Award; AAEE President; AAEE Foundation President; AAEE's Quality of Communication Award; the Paul A. Funk Award; many service roles on advisory, editorial and research boards, and many other recognitions, accomplishments, and achievements that distinguish an unusually successful and impactful career. And, to top it off, as we all know, Laurian is a wonderful friend. That's what makes all of this even more special. Congrats, Laurian.
- Others recognized at the Meetings were Mariano J. Rabassa for his Doctoral Dissertation (supervised by Nick Brozovic) and Joel Cuffey for his M.S. Thesis (supervised by Paul McNamara).
- At the May Faculty Meeting, the following annual recognitions were made: Luiz Freitas and Payal Shah as Outstanding Graduate Students; Josh Woodward and Mariano Rabassa for Outstanding Ph.D. Dissertation; Joel Cuffey for Outstanding M.S. Thesis; Andrea Beller for the Earl M. Hughes Teaching Enhancement Award; Hayri Onal and Alex Winter-Nelson for the GSO's Outstanding Faculty Award; and Linda Foste for the GSO's Outstanding Staff Award.
- This year, Alex Winter-Nelson was one of two faculty members from the College selected for three year terms to the Academy of Teaching Excellence.

Braden's position as Director of Undergraduate Programs holds new challenges

John Braden has worn several hats in his 30-year career at the University of Illinois. He began as a professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, and most of his teaching and research has been in the area of environmental and natural resource economics. For the past five years, he has been the Director of Undergraduate Programs in ACE, and as he enters his 31st year at the University, he is pleased to find himself working in an area that differs somewhat from his past experience.

"One thing that I have worked on, with Bob Hauser's leadership, has been the development of our new financial planning concentration," said Braden. "That's brought me into a new area of work personally, and I think it's a valuable area of development for the Department generally. It positions us to engage in a new marketplace, and I think it will provide a growing employment opportunity for students."

Braden teaches ACE 240, Personal Financial Planning, the first course in the concentration. Because the class is also offered to the general student population, Braden said he sees "quite a variety in what students bring to the class. I see some seniors in accounting and finance who come in knowing more than I probably know. And then I see the occasional student from music or chemistry or social work, who is really quite new to the area. I think most of them are surprised at how complex the issues are. When you're taking a course that ranges from taxes to credit to insurance to investments, there's a lot to learn."



Dr. John Braden

Before taking on the position as Director of Undergraduate Programs, Braden worked in a variety of areas around campus. "In the mid-nineties I took a position directing the Water Resources Center on campus for three-and-a-half years. Then I took a position as an associate provost for a little over three years," he said. "After that I directed the Environmental Council for three years before returning to the Department to lead the undergraduate program. I've been around."

Braden said his work in the environmental and natural resource economics area involved the development of several new courses, as well as the program for Environmental and Resource Economics (pERE). "pERE is a program that offers courses, seminars and opportunities to students who wish to conduct research with some of the nation's leading scholars in environmental and resource economics," said Braden. "pERE is open to students from any department and it focuses on economic aspects of environmental and natural resource issues, including land use, species conservation, water quality protection, natural resource use, auto emissions, sustainable development, and many others."

Braden said in recent years his research has grown in a way that appeals to interdisciplinary funding sources. "Increasingly we are doing research that crosses disciplinary boundaries and is of general interest to the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institutes for Health," he noted. "These are non-traditional funding sources for this Department. I may be the poster child for the mission evolution of the Department and the College. We find ourselves playing in different sandboxes than was true 50 years ago."

Braden received both his master's and his Ph.D. in agricultural economics from the University of Wisconsin. He and his wife lived in Champaign for 16 years and in Urbana for the past 15 years. They have two daughters. The oldest has just completed a Ph.D. in bioengineering and is the mother of a one-year-old girl. The younger is a Presbyterian minister and is expecting her first child.

Braden speaks highly of his years with the Department of ACE. "It's remarkable how stable and peaceful this department has been, and I think that is true historically," he said. "This is a place where people have decided to trust one another and not fight over crumbs. They care about the well-being of the Department and its students, and that makes it a very good place to work."

Winter-Nelson works hard to insure students' success

Alex Winter-Nelson believes that helping students succeed is the primary goal in his position as Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics. The first step in that process, says Winter-Nelson, is recruitment.

"I see admissions as key to the whole graduate program," he said. "I feel very strongly that we admit students we think can succeed. When we are good at recruiting the students we want, the graduate program flows smoothly. We end up with a cohort of strong students who really want to be here."

Winter-Nelson said the master's program has a unique strength in that "our program attempts to give our students a terminal degree that will give them conceptual tools that they can apply in a meaningful way. They have a self-contained program that enables them to get good jobs and do good work."

"That means one of his responsibilities as graduate program director is to make sure the best courses are being offered and the students are getting guidance that will enable them to be competent professionals after two years in the program.

"A lot of that process is matchmaking to insure a good relationship between a student and his or her advisor, so the process of writing a thesis is a constructive one," said Winter-Nelson, "and moves them towards where they really want to be."

Some master's students want to continue on to a Ph.D., said Winter-Nelson, which means they often have a slightly different emphasis in their coursework and their thesis work.

"We work very hard to insure our Ph.D. students are getting cutting edge training in applied economics," he said. "After extensive training in theory and methods they take field courses - advanced courses in their areas of specialty - and writing their



Dr. Alex Winter-Nelson

dissertation." Winter-Nelson said one of his goals for the next year is to work closely with instructors in the field courses to try to enhance the coordination among them.

After that, students are required to take field courses - advanced courses in their areas of specialty - and write their dissertation. Winter-Nelson said one of his goals for the next year is to work closely with instructors in the field courses to try to enhance the coordination among them.

Winter-Nelson said he is pleased with the placements the program has had in the last few years.

"Many of our students have a very applied interest - that's why they come here. In the last year we placed two graduates at the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, D.C., which is really the premiere international organization for agricultural economics research," he noted. "Another student took an academic position at Texas A & M, and we've also placed students within government organizations, such as the USDA Economic Research Service."

"Close to half of our Ph.D. students are international, and they have an existing relationship with university or government entities in their home countries," he continued, "so they go back to build their home institutions."

Winter-Nelson received his Ph.D. in Applied Economics from the Food Research Institute at Stanford University in 1982. He came directly to the University of Illinois from California, and much of his own research is motivated by an interest in reducing poverty in developing countries.

"I did my dissertation research on food marketing and agricultural policy issues in Kenya," said Winter-Nelson, "and I continue to go back to Africa on a regular basis. I'm wrapping up a project right now with a graduate student and other colleagues in Ethiopia. The theme is measuring poverty and measuring the impacts of different interventions. We're asking questions like 'How well does micro-finance address the needs of the poorest? What technologies have helped people who are in different degrees of poverty?'" In the last five years, Winter-Nelson's research has taken him to Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Ghana.

Winter-Nelson is also involved in the program for Environmental and Resource Economics (pERE), and the International Policy and Development Program (IPAD). He describes both as "forums for faculty and students to discuss research and move forward on research projects." Winter-Nelson is also part of the International Nutritional Community of Scholars, a group of faculty members from various departments with similar interests in international nutrition.

Winter-Nelson is married and he and his wife Karen have two sons, Ezra (14) and Timothy (12). The family enjoys hiking and backpacking, and Winter-Nelson said one of the perks of working for the University is being able to make a yearly trip to California, where they spend a month visiting family and camping in Yosemite National Park.

Winter-Nelson said he believes the graduate program is growing stronger each year, but he concludes by giving much of the credit to the students.

"Some of the innovations we're making to our program are coming from the students themselves," he said, "and I think that reflects the quality of the students. It takes a lot of initiative and a lot of intelligence to make suggestions like that. My hope is that those students will go on to recruit other, like-minded students who are contemplating joining our program."

Newsletter Credits: Robert J. Hauser, Senior Editor. Leanne Lucas, writer, Pam Splittstoesser, coordinator. Unless otherwise indicated, photos are courtesy of College of ACES staff photographer David Riecks.

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