

# THE DARR DIFFERENCE

Volume 12 - Spring 2026



Missouri  
State

WILLIAM H. DARR  
COLLEGE of  
AGRICULTURE

# A LETTER FROM OUR DEAN,



The past year has been one of continued momentum, connection and purpose for the Darr College of Agriculture. As I reflect on the stories shared throughout this magazine, I am both proud of how far we have come and energized by the direction we are heading.

What once felt like a period of transformation has now become our foundation. The integration of hospitality leadership, the evolution of our academic programs and the strengthening of our facilities and partnerships have positioned the Darr College of Agriculture as a leader in preparing students for the full farm-to-fork experience. Today, our students benefit from a more connected, innovative and industry-relevant education than ever before.

This year also marks an important milestone as we officially roll out our 2025–2030 strategic plan, DarrNext. This plan is more than a roadmap, it is a commitment to our future. DarrNext focuses on growing our student body, enhancing the student experience through meaningful hands-on learning,

investing in academic programs that meet industry needs, strengthening our culture and community, and stewarding our facilities to support innovation and success. At its core, DarrNext reflects who we are and where we are going: a college dedicated to cultivating leaders who will serve, innovate and make a lasting impact in agriculture, food systems and hospitality.

This issue of The Darr Difference highlights what truly makes our college special, our people and the impact they create. From the growth in attendance at signature events like Darr Difference Day and the Annual Ag Celebration, to the achievements of our student organizations, interns and alumni, it is clear that our community is engaged, supportive and thriving. Whether it's innovation in the classroom, entrepreneurship in the field or service across the globe, our students and graduates continue to represent the very best of Darr.

But the true Darr Difference cannot be captured in plans or facilities alone. It is found in the mentorship between faculty and students. It is found in the sense of belonging our students describe when they call Darr “home.” It is found in the hands-on experiences that prepare our graduates to step confidently into their careers. And it is found in the passion our alumni carry forward as they make an impact in their communities and industries.

Agriculture and hospitality are about connection between people, resources and opportunities. At Darr, we are proud to cultivate those connections every day. Together, we are not only advancing our college, we are shaping the future of the industries we serve.

Thank you for being part of this journey and for helping define The Darr Difference.

*Melissa A. Bledsoe*  
Dr. Melissa A. Bledsoe, Dean

# MEET THE WRITERS



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I am incredibly proud of the dedication and professionalism our senior agricultural communication students demonstrated in producing The Darr Difference. From concept development, writing, design and editing, they approached every step with care and commitment. Through collaboration, attention to detail and many hours of dedicated work, they created a publication that reflects both the quality of their education and their readiness to serve the agricultural industry. This magazine stands as a testament to their growth and their passion for sharing the story and impact of our college and industry. - Clara Dickinson Instructor in Agricultural Communications



# What's Inside

6	Darr Next - Inside the Strategic Plan reshaping the future of Missouri State's College of Agriculture. Written by: Kayin Baker	Ag Bear, Big Impact - How the Darr College of Agriculture shaped Jamie Rogers. Written by: Colin McIntyre	38
11	Crown, Crops, and Cattle - Three students, one passion for agriculture. Written by: Maddy Davis	Finding Your Place - How connection, support and shared purpose turn the DCOAG into more than a campus. Written by: Maddy Davis	42
18	Bidding for a Better Future - Investing in the next generation at the 2025 Alumni & Friends Ag Celebration. Written by: Andi Baker	Tell Your Story - How Missouri producers are learning to market themselves online. Written by: Maddy Davis	44
22	From Field to Fork - Bringing hospitality into the College of Agriculture. Written by: Savannah Grove	Where Soil Meets Service - Hannah Rockers Peace Corps journey. Written by: Savannah Groves	48
26	Cooking Up Leadership - How Carries Cafe is changing students lives. Written by: Colin McIntyre	Planting the Seeds of Success - How the SSAC helps students grow. Written by: Kayin Baker	52
30	Built Before the Bidding Starts - Inside Journagan Ranch's record breaking \$654,000 sale. Written by: Kayin Baker	More than a Meeting - How COAG organizations are impacting students everyday. Written by: Andi Baker	56
34	20 Years, One Grape - Dr. Qiu's Two-decade pursuit of the better grape. Written by: Colin McIntyre	Seeing a Darr Difference - A Day of service giving back to the community in honor of Bill Darr. Written by: Andi Baker	58
		Built for What's Next - Inside Missouri State Agriculture's push to close the gap between classroom and career. Written by: Kayin Baker	62

# DARR NEXT



DarrNext is the 2025-2030 Strategic Plan of the William H. Darr College of Agriculture at Missouri State University.

## Inside the *Strategic Plan* Reshaping the Future of Missouri State's College of Agriculture

The next idea, the next step, the next investment, the next chapter, the next level, DarrNext.

The 2025-2030 strategic plan for the William H. Darr College of Agriculture at Missouri State University didn't start with a document. It started with a question: what do the people who work and learn here think this college needs to become?

To find out, Dr. Melissa Bledsoe, Dean of The College of Agriculture, assembled a steering committee that looked like a cross-section of the college itself. Carrie Crews, manager of the Darr Agricultural Center facilities and events; Dr. Kara Wolfe, director of the School of Hospitality and Agricultural Leadership; Dr. Lacy Sukovaty, director of the School of Agricultural Science and Conservation; Nichole Busdieker-Jesse, a senior instructor in agricultural business; Matt Bekebrede, a instructor in hospitality leadership; Matt Wommack, an assistant professor in environmental plant science and farm coordinator; Dr. Wenping Qiu, a distinguished professor in environmental plant science at the Fruit Experiment Station in Mt. Grove and Lucie Amberg, director of communications in the Office of the Provost. Guiding the process was Dr. Tim Mottet, senior consultant with AASCU Consulting, who helped the committee turn

months of honest conversation into a coherent plan.

The work unfolded across several intensive visits, each building on the last.

In September 2024, the group came together for the first time to assess the college's strategic position, asking hard questions about where things stood and where they needed to go. By November, the committee had widened the lens considerably. They ran SWOT group sessions with faculty, staff, and students, conducted one-on-one interviews with external partners, sat down with alumni and industry partners and sent surveys out to every corner of the college community. When the results came back, faculty, staff, students, partners and alumni all were weighing in. From that environmental analysis, five priorities began to take shape.

Through the spring of 2025, the committee reconvened to confirm the main goals, sequence a resource plan and lock in the initiatives that would give the plan real depth. By fall, DarrNext was complete with a 5-goal framework, including new vision, mission and value statements.

This was not a top-down exercise. It was a college taking stock of itself, seriously, carefully and together.

### **A Pause Worth Taking**

The steering committee had done the hard work. The feedback was in, the goals were drafted and DarrNext was nearly ready to publish. Then in Fall 2025, Missouri State University released its own university-wide strategic plan — Igniting Opportunity — and Dean Bledsoe made a deliberate call: slow down and get it right.



Rather than push DarrNext out the door and retrofit alignment later, the college chose to pause, compare the two plans side by side and making sure the college's direction was genuinely woven into the university's broader vision, not just adjacent to it.

"Our strategic planning process yielded many similar themes as Igniting Opportunity. It was good timing for us to understand the university-wide initiatives and ensure our plan aligned as we finalized it," Stated Dr. Bledsoe.

The extra work paid off. DarrNext now sits in clear conversation with Igniting Opportunity, which means the college is not just pursuing its own goals in isolation; it is advancing the university's mission and strategic priorities at the same time. For students, faculty, the industries and communities the college serves, coherence is a feature, not a footnote.

### The Plan

The timing of DarrNext is not a coincidence. It is an opportunity.

The Darr College of Agriculture is in the middle of a significant and exciting evolution. The college recently expanded to now include the hospitality leadership program, bringing a dynamic new dimension to what it means to study food, industry and community under one roof. The college is bigger, more interconnected and more relevant to modern agriculture and food systems than ever before, and DarrNext was built

“DarrNext embraces what has grown the college through the decades, being student and people-centered, and it supports the growth and innovation needed to adapt for the future of educating agricultural leaders,” said Dr. Bledsoe

to match that momentum.

The vision is clear: the Darr College of Agriculture will be a model institution that cultivates and supports transformative leaders who uplift communities through innovation, collaboration and a lifelong commitment to service.

The mission gives that vision direction: the Darr College is committed to the advancement of its industries and communities by investing in those who lead, serve and innovate.

Three core values anchor everything:

- **Empower Students** — by expanding experiential learning, cultivating leadership through opportunity and strengthening critical thinking through rigorous academic programming.
- **Support Communities** — by fostering collaboration in innovation and research, exploring ways to add value and engaging in meaningful discourse with the next generation of leaders.
- **Enrich Industries** — by nurturing the connections between the land the college stewards

and the people it serves.

These values translate directly into five strategic goals: growing student enrollment, elevating the student experience, building a strong people and culture, investing in academics and stewarding the college's facilities and infrastructure. Together, they form a roadmap for a college that knows where it's going—and why.

"DarrNext embraces what has grown the college through the decades, by being student and people-centered, and it supports the growth and innovation needed to adapt for the future of educating agricultural leaders," Dr. Bledsoe said.

### People Impact

At the center of DarrNext is a straightforward commitment: people come first, not as a slogan, but as a design principle built into every goal.

That principle starts with students and getting more of them here. Goal 1 focuses on enrollment growth not for its own sake, but because a thriving college attracts more resources, more partnerships and more opportunity for everyone in it. The Darr College of Agriculture is actively working to recruit the next generation of agricultural and hospitality leaders — and to make sure the college they arrive at is ready for them.

Goal 2 makes the experience of being here worth staying for. The college is building an authentic, relationship-centered environment: better mentoring, deeper industry connections, more opportunities to learn by doing and experiencing. Those aren't abstract commitments. They're already shaping how advisors work with students, how faculty engage beyond the classroom and how the college thinks about programming.

Goal 3 builds on that foundation by nurturing a collaborative community where leadership and personalized support drive the mission forward. The college is strengthening every relationship, from employees, to students, alumni and industry partners.

For students weighing their options, this is a college that has looked honestly at what it is and made a serious plan to become something better. That matters.

“The excitement of what is to come through DarrNext, further solidifies why I chose to call The Darr College of Agriculture home. It's a plan written with us and for us,” exclaimed Cox.

We asked senior Jessee Cox what the culture of the Darr College of Agriculture means to her.

"The people I met along the way are why my time here has been so meaningful and ultimately fueled my passion for the industry," said Cox.

### Already in Motion

DarrNext isn't a someday plan. It is already shaping how the college operates.

Academic program reviews are underway as part of Goal 4, led by faculty Program Coordinators who are driving assessment, advisory board engagement, and curricular development and refinement.

The integration of hospitality into the college is itself part of the story. It has expanded the college's reach, created new connections between agriculture, food and beverage systems and consumers, and opened new academic possibilities that didn't exist before. One example is the new program in Tourism Management - an interdisciplinary degree putting a growing industry at the forefront of student opportunity. DarrNext was designed with that expansion in mind, and it shows.

A plan as ambitious as DarrNext requires the space to match. Goal 5 — Facilities and Infrastructure Stewardship — is one of the most tangible commitments in the entire plan: to strategically

invest in and modernize college facilities so they support the kind of learning, research and workforce preparation that defines the college.

The most visible early work is happening at the foundation level, literally. The college has begun assessing facility

needs across its academic buildings, laboratories, farms and remote sites, a process that will produce a comprehensive facilities master plan aligned with university priorities. That plan isn't just a wish list. It is a structured, phased set of recommendations, including cost estimates and funding strategies, that the college is committed to presenting to university leadership by Summer 2027.

Two facility projects are already taking shape under that broader strategy. Design of the college's beef education facilities are soon to be underway, enhanced to strengthen experiential learning, support applied research, and deepen engagement with the beef industry. And planning for phased renovations to Karls Hall is advancing and targeted to begin by 2030—a modernization that will update instructional technology and bring the building in line with where teaching and learning are heading.

### What Students Are Saying

When students heard the values behind DarrNext the reaction wasn't polite interest. It was recognition. These were words that matched something they already believed about why they came here.

"The excitement of what is to come through DarrNext, further solidifies why I chose to call The Darr College of Agriculture home. It is a plan written with us and for us," exclaimed Cox.

DarrNext gives every reason to believe in the next chapter of the Darr College of Agriculture.



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# Crown, Crops and Cattle

Three students, one passion for agriculture

Success does not look the same for every student—but at Darr College of Agriculture, it often starts with passion and grows through experience.

Whether entering the rodeo arena, working in a commercial greenhouse, or managing cattle on a large-scale ranch,

students are discovering ways to transform their passions into real-world opportunities. They are developing skills while also crafting the futures they have imagined for themselves through internships, leadership positions and participating in hands-on learning.

These student spotlights highlight individuals who have taken different paths within agriculture. Yet, they all share a common drive: a willingness to work hard, take risks and pursue what they are passionate about.

“ I felt like I had finally accomplished the goal I set for myself in third grade.” - Milliken

# Rodeo Queen's Journey



Photo Courtesy of Madison Goetz

Students are taking on leadership roles and advocating for the agricultural industry through competition and community engagement—an experience that senior Madison Goetz has wholeheartedly accepted. For Goetz, the journey to becoming Miss Rodeo Missouri 2026 began not in the arena but with a passion.

Goetz, a senior majoring in animal science, did not come from a rodeo family. Her passion for horses is what motivated her to look for chances, ultimately guiding her to a position at a barn where she encountered friends who helped her discover the rodeo scene during her teenage years. “I have always had a strong love for horses and my passion to be around them was definitely my motivator to pursue any chances I got to ride,” Goetz said. “I have worked really hard to build my path in the industry and look forward to continuing to do so.”

Her perseverance paid off when she was named Miss Rodeo Missouri 2026. For Goetz, however, the title means more than just a victory; it serves as a gateway to the future she has been working toward. “When I was announced as the winner, I was really just excited. After a long pageant day and preparation, I began to reflect and think about how blessed I was to have the opportunity to hold the title,” stated Goetz. “Because I have worked so hard to emerge myself into the horse industry, it was such a reward to feel like I have another step in the door to the world I have longed to be a part of for so long.”

## The Competition

The Missouri Rodeo Queen pageant challenges contestants in areas of horsemanship pattern, a fashion show, public speaking and impromptu questions. All skills that are essential for representing the sport.

“All categories allow the girls to showcase their strongest qualities, while improving on more difficult skills,” said Goetz.

When asked about the importance of the skills demonstrated in the pageant, Goetz replied, “As a queen, you never know the questions someone might have for you, or the background they come from, so it is important that every queen can help the public understand the sport of rodeo.”

## The Queen's Responsibilities

Now serving as an ambassador for rodeo, Goetz travels around Missouri participating in events and connecting with communities. Goetz is especially passionate about inspiring the younger generation. She is most excited about school visits so she can plant the rodeo bug amongst them.

As queen, her responsibilities include representing the sport of rodeo, carrying sponsorship flags at rodeos (alongside Miss Teen Rodeo Missouri, Miley Mae Phillips) and participating in parades. When asked what she hopes people learn about rodeo from watching these events, Goetz replied, “I hope people

learn the true grit and hard work of every cowboy/cowgirl that steps foot into that arena. It takes a lot of courage to perform on live animals in front of thousands of people.”

Goetz continues to speak about the well-being of the rodeo's livestock. She says, “I also hope people can continue to see and understand the care that goes into taking care of our rodeo livestock; the more behind-the-scenes views we can give the public, the better!”

## The Support Behind the Crown

Former Miss Rodeo Missouri, Maggie Everson, was a big influence on Goetz's passion for the title. “She was a great mentor and still continues to help me navigate the crazy world of being a rodeo queen!” Alongside Everson, Goetz named two others as her biggest supporters throughout her journey. “My parents are obviously my biggest supporters in life, and have learned that

“Don't take no for an answer.”

I don't give up easily at all, however in my rodeo journey, Maggie, and the whole crew of Sunset Trails

Stables, has been my biggest backbone in this journey,” relays Goetz.

To the little girls who want to follow in her footsteps, Goetz had one piece of advice: “Don't take no for an answer. To any parents reading this, I'm sorry, however if I took every no I got as an answer, I would not be where I am today. So, when one door closes, find another one, and push your way in, because hard work and determination

will get you further than you could of every imagined.”

## The Balance of Time and the Future Ahead

While competing for the title, Goetz was also pursuing her degree in Animal Science. Balancing her title with college has not been easy, but with time management and support from mentors, she has been able to be successful. “The balance is definitely difficult,” she said, “But with support from loved ones and good time management, anything is possible!”

When she gets busy, Goetz has a few words of wisdom that keep her motivated to keep going. She remarked, “Remembering that being tired is a blessing. I feel so blessed to be tired from riding, or schoolwork, because those things are not opportunities everyone gets in life. So, remembering to be blessed for tired eyes definitely keeps me motivated to keep pushing.”

Looking ahead, Goetz plans to attend graduate school in Fall 2026 to pursue her master's in animal science. She plans to have an emphasis on the genetics and overall health of equine and cattle. Goetz attributes this form of research to a big part of the rodeo industry, as keeping the livestock healthy is what improves their abilities as athletes.

“My passion for rodeo and agriculture burns deep, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share that with others. It's been an amazing experience and I would encourage anyone with a similar passion to pursue it.”

# Finding a Future in the Greenhouse

For junior Zach Morris, a horticulture major, success is rooted in consistency and attention to detail. “My interest started with my aunt, who got me into plants early on. From there, it turned into something I actually enjoyed doing every day. I like working with plants, seeing them grow and being part of that process.”

That enthusiasm led him to a six-month internship at Neal Mast Greenhouses in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from late June to mid-December 2025. He served as a greenhouse grower intern in the large production facility. Morris learned about this internship through the American Floral Endowment and his connections through Professor Cheri Hamilton.

## The In's and Out's

Morris had applied for this internship to gain hands-on experience and grow his skills in greenhouse management. Morris had a lot of responsibilities during his time at Neal Mast. “My responsibilities included transplanting, spacing, watering and overall crop maintenance,” he said. “I also assisted with chemical applications using a 100-gallon sprayer, including plant growth regulators (PGRs), pesticides and fungicides. In addition, I helped track

plant growth by measuring crops regularly to monitor development and ensure they were meeting production standards.”

Each day, Morris had a routine to maintain the health of the plants within the greenhouse.

“A typical day included transplanting plants, spacing trays, watering, checking plant health and helping maintain greenhouse conditions. Some days also included spraying and scouting for pests,” described Morris.

Managing various responsibilities could be challenging at times, yet the experience allowed him to develop his organizational skills and boost his confidence in identification. “I’m proud of building my experience scouting for diseases and insects and getting better at identifying problems and choosing the right chemicals to manage them,” Morris said.

## The Impact

Reflecting upon his time in Michigan, Morris said, “My biggest takeaway was how important it is to stay consistent and pay attention

to detail in everything you do. From walking drip tape lines, measuring plants, checking sticky traps, to spraying and scouting for pests and disease every small task plays a role in the overall crop.”

“It helped me get better at

connecting what I was seeing in the greenhouse with the right actions to take,” said Morris.

In addition to his technical abilities, Morris had the opportunity to create meaningful connections with industry mentors. “I made lasting friendships with growers and supervisors who took me under their wings. They showed me different ways to handle problems and shared their experiences with me, which helped me to grow a lot,” Morris said. In describing the internship as a whole, Morris simply said it was “controlled chaos.”

Not only did Morris gain an internship experience, but he also given a scholarship as a part of the program. When sharing about this opportunity Morris said, “It meant a lot to me. It showed that people believed in my work and gave

“Just go for it and don’t overthink it. You’re going to learn by doing.”

me the opportunity to gain this kind of experience. It helped push me to take it seriously and make the most out of it.”

## The Future

Morris was able to gain a new perspective on his future career through this internship. Morris said, “It showed me that I enjoy greenhouse production and the daily work that comes with it.” The hands-on experience and the ability to see the crop from start to finish grew his interest in working toward a management role in the future.

Morris plans to keep building his experience in this industry through school and working in various greenhouses. His goal is to improve his skills so that he can continue to move toward a career in greenhouse production one day.

Reflecting upon his own journey, Morris had a piece of advice to give to any student interested in following a new opportunity. He said, “Just go for it and don’t overthink it. You’re going to learn by doing it, and the more effort you put in, the more you’ll get out of it. Ask questions and take every task seriously.”

When asked if he had any final words to describe his journey, Morris said, “I’m someone who shows up getting ready to work and learning every day. This experience pushed me to be more precise and consistent, and it confirmed that this is what I want to do. I’m not just interested in horticulture; I’m committed to building a future in greenhouse production and continuing to grow in this field.”



Photo Courtesy of Zach Morris.



Photo Courtesy of Lanie Milliken.

# Dream to Reality

For junior Lanie Milliken, an agricultural communications major, the hands-on experiences go even further. Placing her at the heart of a large-scale agricultural operation where every decision carries weight. For Milliken, an internship at Gardiner Angus Ranch (GAR) was not just another opportunity; it was the completion of a dream.

## A Dream Years in the Making

“My family has been GAR customers for the last 13

years, and my interest in this internship originally sparked when I was in third grade while sitting at my first Gardiner sale,” Milliken said. “At that time, it was Henry Gardiner who introduced that class of interns, and I knew that someday I wanted to be one of them.”

Years later, Milliken achieved that dream, and her official title was Fall 2025 Gardiner Angus Ranch Intern. That childhood moment stuck

with her throughout the years and as her knowledge of the beef industry grew, so did her passion. Especially for the role genetics and data play in shaping the production industry.

## Learning the Industry from the Ground Up

From the beginning, it was hands-on. “My very first day, we fit and pictured the first 12 lots of each category of cattle for the upcoming sales,” remarked Milliken. Throughout the internship, her daily responsibilities changed with the season. Milliken relayed that from August to September, her responsibilities were focused on prepping for the September sale. They also, conducted carcass ultrasounds on young bulls for the upcoming sales. “During this time, I was able to see two bull ultrasounds that were immediately pulled and sent to stud—later becoming GAR Grandslam and GAR Diligent,” explained Milliken.

After the September sale, they shifted their focus to travelling for the Henry C. Gardiner Lecture series. They traveled to Hereford, Texas, and Throckmorton, Texas during this time. Upon returning, they began working on fall pastures to bring in cattle for breeding. Milliken said that they did this through horseback in the mornings, and would work calves later in the afternoon.

## Beyond the Ranch: A Full Industry Perspective

“Once all fall pastures were gathered, we began administering breeding shots, setting up cows to calve in

two-week increments, and heat checking for breeding and embryo transfer,” said Milliken. She said this time allowed her to work with top donors in the Angus breed and to observe both embryo collections and transfers.

Milliken shared a fond memory of her time with GAR that connected her back to her home. “One of my favorite days was touring National Beef in Dodge City,” she said. “It was incredible to see the industry from beginning to end on such a large scale, especially knowing that my own cattle are harvested there.”

## Growth Through Challenge

With opportunity came challenge. Juggling the multitude of responsibilities during the busy sale preparation periods posed quite a challenge for Milliken. Nonetheless, she persevered and learned a lot in the process. “It required strong time management, attention to detail, and the ability to stay organized under pressure,” she said. “It was also challenging being far away from home, as well as learning how to read and adapt how new people work cattle, which pushed me to grow both personally and professionally.”

Another challenge was balancing work and homework. While completing this internship, Milliken was completing online classes as well. She credits two skills with getting her through it. “There were a lot of late nights, and I

often completed homework over lunch or in between working pens of cattle. It took discipline and time management to balance both.”

## Finding Purpose in Communication

Throughout the internship, Milliken developed a deeper understanding of the role communication plays in agriculture. “It showed me how important it is to effectively communicate the value of genetics, data and management through data-driven marketing to both producers and consumers,” she explained.

This internship helped to solidify her career path in the future. “Because of this experience, I plan to pursue a career in agricultural communications where I can advocate for the industry, help producers succeed and bridge the gap between agriculture and the public,” remarked Milliken.

One moment brought everything back to where it started for Milliken. “When I was standing in the ring on sale day, Mark introduced my class of interns. I felt like I had finally accomplished the goal I set for myself in third grade,” she said.

## Looking Ahead

Now, with the internship completed, Milliken is focused on building a future rooted in the same passion. She shared a few words of advice to anyone considering an opportunity like this one. “Don’t be afraid to set high goals for yourself, even when others may discourage you. If it’s something you are

passionate about, go for it,” she said. “Also, build strong relationships with mentors—you never know when you may need a letter of recommendation on short notice.”

Milliken detailed how important this internship was for her future, “I was interviewing for another internship and was told that my experience at Gardiner set me apart and I truly realized how important my time there was for my future.”

When asked if she had any final words to share about her experience, Milliken had a few memorable words. “My experience at Gardiner Angus Ranch was truly unmatched. It helped shape my goals, strengthened my skills, and confirmed my passion for advocating for agriculture and the beef industry,” she said. “I am incredibly grateful to the Gardiner family for the opportunity and the impact they have had on my life.”



Photo Courtesy of Lanie Milliken.



# BIDDING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

Investing in the next generation at the 2025 Ag Alumni & Friends Ag Celebration

By the time the ballroom at the Bond Learning Center begins to fill, it is not just the sound of the hundreds of voices that stand out—it is the familiarity.

There is laughter carrying from across the tables. Alumni greet one another like there has been no time that has passed while industry partners settle into conversations that pick up right where they left off.

There is a rhythm in the room—one that is built on shared experiences, connections and a common goal.

The Annual Ag Celebration at Missouri State University’s Darr College of Agriculture is easy to describe with pen and paper—an evening that raises thousands of dollars for student scholarships. But in the fall of 2025, that impact reached new heights, generating nearly

\$300,000 in scholarship support through the Missouri State University Foundation.

Walking into the ballroom, however, it becomes something else entirely. It becomes an environment where past, present and future meet, where connections are strengthened and investments are made into something greater than the event itself.

Every attendee is here

for the same reason. Not for themselves-but for the students who are not.

## A full-circle investment

While many of the students impacted by the evening may never step into the room, they feel its effects long after the night ends.

For Aubrey Jung, a senior agriculture education major, that impact is both personal and immediate.

“Seeing the profit from our donated item go directly back into our organization was incredibly meaningful,” Jung said. “Sigma Alpha is a student-led organization, we work hard to fundraise and be good stewards of the resources entrusted to us. Knowing that every dollar raised from the Ag Celebration auction items directly supports our members, leadership development and service initiative was both encouraging and affirming. It truly showed the power of alumni and community support coming full circle.”

Student organizations within the college contribute to the event through donated auction items, allowing them to be part of something that extends beyond a single evening. When those items are sold, the return goes directly back into the organizations, supporting future programming, leadership opportunities and continued involvement.

“It is so important for student organizations to

participate in events like this because it strengthens the connection between current members and those who have



paved the way before us,” Jung said. “Events like the Ag Celebration not only provide financial support, but they also remind students that they are part of something much bigger than themselves.”

## Beyond the room

By the time the evening closes out and the ballroom beings to empty, the impact does not end.

The conversations eventually fade. The bidders pay out. The lights shut off.

But the impact begins to take shape in the days and months that follow.

“Events like the Ag Celebration not only provide financial support, but they also remind students that they are part of something much bigger than themselves.” - Jung

Scholarships funded through the Ag Alumni & Friends Committee begin to change what is possible for students. For some, it means working fewer hours at a second job. For others, it means having the ability to take on leadership roles, join organizations or fully invest in their education.

Most of the students whose lives are changed by these scholarships will never see the night where the funding came to fruition, but they carry its impact with them every day.

## The stories that stay

In an office on the Darr Agricultural Center campus, Carrie Crews keeps a binder close by filled with every letter written by scholarship recipients. Each one tells a story.

“The letters are full of gratitude directly from the heart,” Crews said.

Some are simple. “You have made a meaningful difference in my academic journey.”

Other reflect the realities that student face. “I have been working two jobs for the last two years to help pay for my tuition...I want to graduate debt free, and this scholarship is helping me do this.”

And some carry the weight of something even greater. “When my degree is finished, I will be the first person in my family to receive a college degree.”

These letters are more than expressions of thanks. They are constant reminders of the purpose behind the event and the community that continues to support it.

#### **Creating a space to grow**

While scholarships provide financial support, their impact often reaches far beyond the dollar amount.

According to Dr. Christine Sudbrock, an Ag Alumni committee member and professor in the Darr College of Agriculture, that support creates something students rarely have enough of—space.

“So many of our students are working full-time jobs in addition to all of their responsibilities at school,” Sudbrock said. “Additional financial support gives students some breathing room and hopefully allows them to participate in student clubs and organizations and other

opportunities they might have otherwise had to miss out on.”

That space changes everything.

It allows student to engage deeper, build connections and take advantage of opportunities that shape not only their college experience but their future as well.

“I hope we see a continuation of what we’re seeing now—alumni who recognize how critical scholarships were for their student experience and are now in a position to pay it forward to the next generation,” she said.

#### **Connections that last**

The Ag Celebration also strengthens relationships beyond the college and university itself. “This is where the impact begins.”

For Matt Wommack, the event creates a connection point between the college and industry partners.

“It gives our industry partners a connection to the university,” Wommack said.

“This provides opportunity for industry partners to learn and make suggestions on what is being taught... and allows them to offer feedback in order to keep our programs up to date.”

Those relationships extend into internships, career opportunities and mentorship for students long after

the celebration concludes.

Alumni show students what is available to them after graduation and make great mentors,” Wommack said.

#### **A legacy in motion**

Now entering its 14th year, the Ag Celebration continues to grow—not just in the numbers, but in the meaning.

Each year, alumni and friends return to support the event through donations, auction participation and continued investment in the college. Increasingly, those who once received scholarship are retuning in a new role—as donors themselves.

“When recipients and donors recognize and remember the impact and purposefully move the generosity forward, it directly change lives,” Crews

said. “Together, you show up and showcase how to invest in students. And we see the momentum continuing to the next generation.”

#### **What remains and continues**

The ballroom empties at the end of the night. The laughter fades and conversations end. But the impact created in that room does not stay there.

It is carried forward—into the classrooms, careers and eventually, back into the room where it all began.

And that is what makes the Ag Celebration more than just a single, annual event.

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# FROM FIELD TO FORK

Bringing Hospitality into the College of Agriculture

For many people, the term agriculture creates images of open fields, tractors plowing across the horizon and farmers carefully tending to livestock. The phrase hospitality, on the other hand, often evokes images of five-star restaurants, fancy hotels, black-tie events and memorable dining experiences. At first glance, the two fields may seem unrelated. Yet, within Missouri State University's Darr College of Agriculture, hospitality and agriculture share a powerful connection: one that links the production of food directly to the experiences people have when they enjoy it.

According to the Director of the School of Hospitality and Agriculture Leadership Dr. Kara Wolfe, the relationship between these industries is not only logical but essential. Agriculture produces the ingredients that feed communities, while hospitality transforms those ingredients into experiences that brings people together.

"I think hospitality and agriculture work together because farmers produce the food, and then commercial hospitality operations—like restaurants, event centers and hotels—serve the food." Dr. Wolfe explained. "So, you have that whole continuum from production to consumption under one umbrella."



That idea, moving food from the field to the guest's plate, is at the heart of why hospitality plays such an important role in the College of Agriculture.

## A Program With History

While hospitality is a new addition to the Darr College of Agriculture, the program itself has been part of Missouri State University for decades. Dr. Wolfe explained that the hospitality program began in the early 1980s and has evolved over time as the university determines where it fit best academically.

"I believe the program started in 1983," Dr. Wolfe said. "The program was originally housed in Health and Human Services, then CNAS (The College of Natural and Applied Sciences) and now the College of Agriculture."

Over the years, the program moved between colleges as administrators evaluated where its connections were strongest. Eventually, the College of Agriculture emerged as the most natural fit. However, this alignment is not unique to Missouri State. Across the country, hospitality programs are located within colleges of agriculture.

"The University of Missouri and the University of Arkansas have hospitality in their Colleges of Agriculture," Dr. Wolfe said. Due to this trend, Missouri State's program is part of a broader academic movement that recognizes how closely hospitality and food systems are connected.

"I think we are a good fit here and plan to stay in the

College of Agriculture." Dr. Wolfe said.

## A Living Example

At Missouri State, the connection between agriculture and hospitality is not just theoretical; it is visible across campus in meaningful, hands-on ways. One of the clearest examples can be found through student partnered project and collaborations between departments. A few years ago, hospitality students organized a special event at the Darr Agricultural Center in the Bond Ballroom. The class hosted a progressive dinner in which students worked in teams to design themed menus and create unique dining experiences.

Each group focused on incorporating different products that Missouri State's agriculture program produces. "One group used berries from Mountain Grove in their menu," Dr. Wolfe said. "Another group used black walnut syrup from the Forestry Club. That helped showcase and highlight some of the things produced on campus."

By incorporating locally produced ingredients, students were able to demonstrate how agriculture products move beyond the farm and into culinary experiences that highlight both flavor and storytelling. Another example of the strong hospitality-agriculture partnership on campus is Carrie's Café, the student-run restaurant located on campus. There, hospitality students gain real-world experience managing food service operations

“We fit together here on campus.”  
-Dr. Wolfe

while working directly with ingredients connected to the university's agricultural programs.

"They use MSU beef on the menu," Dr. Wolfe explained. "They also have a grow tower that horticulture students started, so herbs like basil, cilantro, parsley and more are grown and then used in the restaurant. We fit together here on campus."

In this setting, students can see the entire cycle of agriculture and hospitality working together. From the production of ingredients to the preparation of meals and the service of guests, hospitality and agriculture work side by side to create a perfect combination.

## Beyond the Classroom: The Rise of Agritourism

The connection between agriculture and hospitality extends far beyond campus. Across the country, farmers are increasingly blending production with guest experience through agritourism.

Agritourism allows farmers to diversify their income by inviting visitors onto their land. Activities may include pick-your-own orchards, pumpkin patches, corn mazes, farm tours, wineries or farm-to-table dining experiences. In each of these situations, hospitality becomes just as important as agriculture.

"That is the whole production-to-consumption model in one place," Dr. Wolfe said.



For farmers, this means understanding not only how to grow crops but also how to create welcoming environments for guests who want to learn about them. A successful agritourism operation requires thoughtful planning, strong marketing and attention to guest experience. These are all areas that hospitality education helps to nurture and develop.

There are also legal and business considerations involved in welcoming visitors onto a farm. Dr. Wolfe explained how, “If you are operating agritourism—such as a corn maze or pumpkin patch—you have guests on your farm and need insurance and liability coverage. The same applies to running a restaurant.” By teaching hospitality law and management, the program helps prepare students for these real-world challenges and gives them the tools they will need to thrive in many different environments.

**Shared Skills: Marketing, Leadership, and Customer Experience**

Hospitality and agriculture also overlap in several key

skill areas at Missouri State, particularly marketing and communication. Agriculture focuses on promoting products such as crops, meat or specialty goods. Hospitality marketing, on the other hand, emphasizes promoting services and experiences. Yet, both disciplines ultimately aim to connect with consumers to meet their needs and promote their products.

“We are both talking about marketing, but one focuses on products and the other on services and experiences,” Dr. Wolfe explained. This shared emphasis on understanding customers is one of the strongest links between the two fields.

A hospitality mindset centers on thinking about others first, anticipating their needs, solving problems and creating positive experiences. Interestingly, the same mindset can also be found in agriculture production.

“In agriculture, whether you are a seed salesperson or a producer, you are thinking about how to solve problems for others and what the end

user wants,” Dr. Wolfe said. “Farmers think about what consumers want and then produce accordingly. That is very similar to hospitality.” Both industries prioritize the same questions: *What does the customer need? How can we help?*

**A Culture of Hospitality**

Beyond the academic connections, hospitality also fits well with the culture of the Darr College of Agriculture.

“Hospitality focuses on the experience,” Dr. Wolfe said. “At Missouri State, the culture within the College of Agriculture is very family-like. Faculty have open doors, and people are very welcoming.” Open doors, collaborative projects and close relationships between professors and students are common throughout the college.

This environment mirrors the values taught in hospitality education. Values centered on kindness, service and creating positive experiences for others make hospitality not just an academic fit for the college, but also a cultural one.

**Opportunities for Every Interest**

One of the most exciting aspects of the hospitality program is its flexibility. Students from many agricultural disciplines can incorporate hospitality concepts into their career paths. For example, hospitality courses can complement majors such as agribusiness, plant science, animal science or agriculture education. The program

also offers an event planning certificate, which requires roughly four or five courses.

This certificate can be especially valuable for students who plan to organize conferences, conventions or large gatherings for agricultural organizations. “If someone is an ag education or ag major,” Dr. Wolfe said, “that certificate could help them plan conventions and events for groups such as Farm Bureau or agricultural companies that bring in buyers.”

Even in fields which seem less connected at first glance can benefit from hospitality skills. Animal science students, for instance, may work with clients who care deeply about their animals. Creating positive experiences for those clients is an important part of the profession.

Similarly, hospitality concepts are becoming increasingly relevant as more hotels and businesses become pet-friendly, creating environments that must accommodate both people and animals. “There is an avenue for every student depending on their interests,” Dr. Wolfe said.

**Looking Ahead**

As agriculture continues to evolve, the partnership between hospitality and agriculture is likely to become even stronger.

Consumers today are increasingly interested in where their food comes from, how it is produced and the stories behind it. Farm-to-table restaurants, agritourism experiences and local food movements are all examples of how hospitality



can help connect people to agriculture.

At Missouri State University, the Darr College of Agriculture is uniquely positioned to prepare students for this future by bringing these disciplines together. “We actively look for ways to collaborate,” Dr. Wolfe said.

Whether through student-run restaurants, overlapping courses or collaborative events, the Darr College of Agriculture continues to highlight the natural connection between agriculture and hospitality. While some people may ask the

question, “Why is hospitality in the College of Agriculture?” the answer becomes clearer with every successful partnership, detailed student project and every wonderful guest experience.

From the first seed planted in the field to the final dish served at the table, agriculture and hospitality are part of the same story. One that feeds communities and brings people together. In the Darr College of Agriculture, that story continues to be written each day.





# Cooking Up Leadership

Tucked away on the edge of campus at Missouri State University, there is a small café on the top floor of a building that is quietly and slowly transforming students into the next generation of hospitality professionals. Carrie's Café may be off the beaten path, but inside its doors, you will find six students are running a fully operational restaurant—and learning lessons that will shape their future careers.

Established in 1992, Carrie's Café has served as a capstone-style, student-run dining experience for decades. Under the leadership of instructor Wajeana Bonczyk, who began teaching the course in 2017, the café continues to evolve every semester. Her philosophy is simple yet powerful: offer exceptional hospitality, serve unique and educational cultural cuisine, source locally when possible, create a positive culture and invest in students so they leave as ethical and inspiring leaders.

## Always Changing

Unlike some of the many campus dining options, Carrie's Café never looks the same twice. Each semester begins with a blank slate.

Over several sessions, they cook, critique, refine and elevate recipes to restaurant quality. Only after rounds of testing does the final menu take shape.

This semester is especially unique. The first weeks feature a French Bistro theme, followed by a Coastal Mediterranean Café menu.

The students who design each menu lead its execution in the kitchen, while the other half of the class runs front-of-house operations. When the theme changes, they switch roles learning more and more.

With only six students enrolled in the class, the structure ensures everyone experiences both sides of the industry, the cooking and the service.

## Learning Beyond the Kitchen

For so many students, Carrie's Café is about stepping outside their comfort zone.

Reece Wohletz, who is typically the person who works behind the scenes in restaurant settings, sees the class as an opportunity to grow in front-of-house service.

"I'm mainly a back-of-house type of person," said Wohletz. "So learning how to be front of house and doing that is kind of my big goal with this class."

He is also excited about serving some of the fellow students and faculty members, the people he sees daily in class and watching them experience food he helped curate.

Katie Youngblood has even bigger aspirations for life. Her long-term goal is to open her own restaurant. For her, Carrie's Café is on the grounds for testing her experiences.

"We've learned how to prep and create recipes and try things out to make sure everything's perfect for customers. That's something I'll definitely take away—learning how to perfect things for the customers."

She is especially excited about this semester's international menu options. From an apple and brie panini on the French menu to gyros and lemon cheesecake on the Mediterranean menu rotation, Youngblood says the class pushes her to try foods she would not normally experience.

River Bieberitz says that time management is the biggest takeaway from the class. The grand opening was high-pressure yet very rewarding.

“When there’s a bunch of orders coming at you, just take a big, deep breath. Focus on what you can do, not what’s coming up.”

That ability to stay calm under pressure is something no textbook can teach a student authentically.

**Real Restaurant Experience**

Carrie’s Café operates like any other real business.

After weeks of preparation, they are finally

ready for its opening day, welcoming both campus and community guests through the doors.

The café markets to the broader Springfield community, hoping to remind people that this is more than a classroom—it is a fully functioning restaurant.

Still, one challenge remains visible. Because the café is tucked away on campus, not centrally located, many students do not even realize it exists. Youngblood hopes to change that for the semesters to come.

“A lot of people don’t even know that it’s here,” she said. “I hope more students come in and try our food.”

Faculty and staff are frequent in the café, but the team continues working to spread the word and draw in more student diners.

**Preparing Leaders for the Industry**

While students learn how to cook and serve, the deeper goal of Carrie’s Café is leadership development. With only six students enrolled this semester, each individual carries a real responsibility for the team. From recipe testing and menu

design to managing prep schedules and executing service, the students are trusted to operate at a professional level.

Bonczyk emphasizes the ethics, accountability and hospitality in every aspect of her course. By the end of the semester, the students don’t just understand how a restaurant functions—they understand

“Focus on what you can do, not what’s coming up.” - Bieberitz

how to lead from the inside. They leave as

better communicators, stronger teammates and more confident decision-makers, ready to step into kitchens, dining rooms or even their own future businesses.

**More Than Food**

Over the last few years, hundreds of students have passed through Carrie’s Café. Some arrived with no food service experience; others came highly experienced. Each semester has ranged from as

few as four students to as many as fourteen. No matter the number, Bonczyk believes every student leaves with something meaningful to take home.

Sometimes it is a sharpened culinary skill set. Sometimes it is confidence under pressure. Sometimes it is a newfound love of baking, cooking or serving others. For some of the students, it sparks a desire to travel and explore the global cuisines. Almost always, it results in friendships that last far beyond the semester.

Every menu changes. Every team is different. But the mission remains steady: cultivate hospitality, leadership and excellence—one service at a time.

For a café that many walk past without noticing, Carrie’s Café is quietly shaping the next generation of restaurant owners, chefs and hospitality professionals—one menu at a time.



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# Built Before the Bidding Starts



In just two hours, the Journagan Ranch generated \$654,000, the highest sale total in its history. But for the man who has managed the operation for 45 years, the record-breaking day was not built in two hours; it was built over decades.

The cattle never step inside the building, but their presence fills the room. Buyers flip through marked-up catalogs while footage plays overhead, each Hereford displayed in crisp detail. Inside the Bond Center, it looks simple: a cow, a number and a final price. On paper, it is even simpler. By the time the last lot was sold, more than

\$654,000 had changed hands. But this year's Journagan Ranch sale was anything but simple.

"Last year our sale was \$654,000," says Marty Lueck, the longtime manager of the Journagan Ranch, still sounding a little stunned. "That just amazed me. It was the highest sale we've ever had. We'd had a couple push half a million, but we just flat busted it. You're looking at virtually bringing in the money it takes to operate the whole ranch in one day, in two hours."

For the William H. Darr College of Agriculture and the Journagan Ranch, it was not

just a big sale; it is the annual test of whether the program's genetics, management and long-term vision hold up in the competitive world of cattle production.

Journagan Ranch sits in the heart of southern Missouri, stretching across over 3,300 acres of pasture and timber. Operated by Missouri State University, the ranch functions as both a working cattle operation and a living classroom. Students studying animal science, agribusiness and other agriculture-related fields often find themselves working alongside staff, learning the daily realities of livestock production.

Throughout the year, students help manage the herd, assist with feeding and pasture management, and observe breeding and herd health decisions that shape the cattle program. The annual production sale is the moment when years of planning and labor become visible—not just to the university, but to cattle producers across the region.

## A Sale That Pays the Bill

Since Missouri State University acquired Journagan Ranch in 2010, the annual production sale has been held at the Darr Agricultural Center. Unlike many university operations, the ranch functions

on a non-allocated budget.

"Virtually every dollar that comes in here pays the bills," Lueck explains, "from labor to fuel to fertilizer. We do not use taxpayer funds to run this operation."

That makes the October sale the financial backbone of the program.

"We can't go get an operating loan," he says. "If we buy a truck or big piece of equipment, it's cash up front, so a sale like this gives us breathing room."

This year's record gross didn't happen by accident, but reflected strong market demand, repeat customers and

cattle built to perform in real-world conditions.

## Built for Missouri Grass

Much of Missouri is dominated by fescue grass, a hardy but challenging forage that tests fertility and longevity. Journagan cattle are bred with that reality in mind.

"You need to breed cattle that will perform on it," Lueck says. "It's not just about numbers on a screen. It's feet, structure, body and then blending that with performance data."

Many of the bulls offered this year trace back to multiple generations within the herd, including females recognized

by the American Hereford Association as Dams of Distinction. That generational consistency gives buyers predictability.

“These cattle go out and do what we tell people they’ll do,” Lueck says.

Longtime customers returned this year, some even representing the third generation of their families to purchase Journagan genetics. New buyers filled the seats as well, many there on a neighbor’s recommendation.

“Word of mouth is by far the best advertising you get,” Lueck says. “You can’t buy that.”

### **Six Weeks to Showtime**

While the genetics represent decades of work, the visible success of sale day is built in six intense weeks.

Garrett Kirk, farm operations manager at Darr, oversees the race to October. Sale cattle are brought in around late August, and from that point forward, Kirk and his team are laser focused.

Twice-daily feeding, constant health monitoring, frequent ration adjustments and watching their coats and condition are some of the major tasks the team handles.

“Feeding sale cattle is different from feeding cow-calf pairs,” Kirk explains. “Developing a feed ration that works for each group and changing it day to day is a major logistical hurdle.”

The pressure for perfection is building.

“I’m a nervous train wreck as

soon as the bidding starts, but then it all goes away once you see that total at the end of the day,” Kirk admits.

Kirk was astounded at the gross total of the sale.

### **Students Behind the Scenes**

During the six weeks before the sale, student workers handle much of the daily work, including feeding, pen maintenance and cattle movement.

Early mornings and long afternoons become routine as the team prepares the animals and facilities for the event. The weeks leading up to the sale, the ranch runs on a steady rhythm.

Feed trucks move through the lots before sunrise, students check water tanks and fence lines and cattle are sorted and monitored throughout the day. Many of those students are balancing full course loads while gaining hands-on experience that few classrooms can replicate.

“The majority of the work during the sale is done by

“The six weeks of extra work paid off. The sale exceeded expectations.”

students,” Kirk says. “They’re the core group driving it.”

Garrett pushes the students to think critically rather than just assigning chores. Students help adjust feed rations, discuss health protocols and connect their classroom learning to practical application.

“It develops self-discipline and practical skills,” he says. “Those are things the agricultural industry requires.”

For Lueck, mentoring students is one of the most meaningful parts of the job.

“I hope it’s a positive learning experience,” he says. “If they leave here seeing things a little differently than when they came, that’s success.”

### **More Than a Number**

The average across all lots was impressive. Repeat and new buyers were all in attendance, and the gross \$654,000 broke ranch records. Lueck takes great pride and responsibility in this number.

“People don’t have to come here,” he says. “They choose to. That tells me the cattle are doing what they’re supposed to do, and that we’re treating

“In this business, you’re always building toward the next year. The sale’s over, but the next one has already started.” - Lueck

people right.” Those short two hours left a lasting impact on our ranch and community by funding operations, supporting student employment, and reinforcing genetics.

Long after the last bid is called and The Bond Center falls quiet, the work continues back at the ranch. The cattle that remain still need feeding, pastures still need managing and another calf crop is already growing.



For a ranch built on decades of breeding decisions, careful management and student labor, the record day was never just about two hours in October.

It was about everything that came before, and everything that comes next.

“In this business, you’re always building toward the next year,” Lueck says. “The sale’s over, but the next one has already started.”



# 20

# Years, One Grape

Dr. Qiu's two-decade pursuit of the better grape

In the vineyards of Missouri, where the unpredictable weather and the persistent plant diseases challenge even the most experienced growers, the idea of innovation is not just a goal; it is a requirement for success. The 20-year process is not nearly over, but 20 years is already driving new innovations for grapes in Missouri. For Dr. Qiu, a researcher in the College of Agriculture, that necessity has sparked a journey that would span two decades, hundreds of seedlings and countless hours put into the field. The result is Norton Blanc, a grape hybrid that represents both scientific precision and agricultural resilience.

## **The Beginning: A Single Flower**

The story started in May 2005 with a simple but deliberate act, which started with removing pollen from a flower. Dr. Qiu carefully removed the pollen from Norton grape flowers, a cultivar known for its disease resistance and cold hardiness, and then introduced pollen from Cabernet Sauvignon, one of the most widely grown and commercially successful grapes in the world.

"I wanted to combine the best traits of both," Dr. Qiu

expressed.

From that initial cross, more than 200 seeds were collected. Just over 100 seedlings successfully germinated and were planted in 2006. What followed was not immediate success, but patience; so many years of it.

## **Patience and Evaluation**

The grapevines are not quick to reveal their potential. It takes several years before they produce fruit and even longer to understand their full capabilities. For Dr. Qiu and his team, that meant waiting the five years before full, meaningful evaluations could begin.

"It's a long process," he said. "You plant, you wait, and then you begin to see what you have."

The evaluation process was meticulous. Each of the seedlings was assessed for traits like disease resistance, cold tolerance and fruit quality. Out of the original 100 plants, only seven were selected as promising candidates. These seven were then replanted

and studied further alongside their parent varieties in a more controlled experiment.

## **Patience in Practice**

This next phase introduced even more rigor. These plants were grown in replicated trials, to ensure the performance could be accurately compared under varying conditions. And again, the team waited, another three years, for the vines to mature and produce fruit, making another cycle.

It was during this stage that Susan Howard, a research associate who worked with the project for many years where she played a critical role. Joining the project early on, Howard focused on the day-to-day care and evaluation of the vines to ensure success.

"It's the tedious part," Howard said. "You're out in the field training them, pruning them and watching how they grow. Every plant is different, and you have to treat them individually."

Her work highlighted a lesser-seen side of agricultural research, as she worked behind

the scenes. While so many breakthroughs often make headlines, they are built on years of consistent, careful labor. Howard described the process as one of observation and comparison, tracking how each plant performed over time and under each of the different conditions.

"You're looking at how much they grow, how well they flower, whether they're strong or weak," said Howard. "Some might grow a lot but not produce much fruit. Others might struggle early on. You have to sort through all of that."

## **Norton Blanc Emerges**

After the years of evaluation, the seven candidates were narrowed to three of the exceptional varieties. Among them is the Norton Blanc, a surprising outcome given its origins. Both Norton and Cabernet Sauvignon are red grapes, yet Norton Blanc emerged as a white grape variety, defying the expectations. The clusters are small but well-formed, and its berries are slightly larger than those of Norton. More importantly, it demonstrated strong disease resistance and an ability to withstand the harsh

“ We are not going to hold on, we keep developing more cultivars.”

winters and late spring freezes becoming increasingly more common in the Midwest, specifically Missouri.

### Testing and Wine Potential

From 2015 to 2020, Norton Blanc underwent the further evaluations needed at the Missouri State Fruit Experiment Station in Mountain Grove. Twelve of the vines were studied in detail and compared directly with Norton under the same conditions. The results were promising.

Norton Blanc has shown consistent yields, moderate resistance to common grape diseases and a high success rate when propagated from cuttings. It also proved resilient in the extreme weather, surviving late spring freezes that can devastate those less hardy varieties.

But perhaps its most exciting part lies in the wine it produces.

Four have already been made, revealing a flavor profile that is both unique and appealing to connoisseurs. The wine carries an aroma of fresh-cut grass and lime, with some of the notes of green apricot, apple and minerality. It can be known as light-bodied yet a sense of complex, it offers a crisp, clean taste that stands apart from traditional Midwest wines.

“It’s a new style,” Dr. Qiu said. “Something people here haven’t experienced before.”

### Implications for Missouri Wine

This innovation could have had significant implications

for the regional wine industry. While Norton has long been the long-time staple due to its resilience, it has not always matched consumer preferences. Cabernet Sauvignon, on the other hand, is widely planted but struggles to survive in Missouri’s crazy climate. Norton Blanc bridges that gap between, offering both an adaptable grape and the market appeal.

### Continuing Innovation

The project is far from over. Despite the success of the Norton Blanc, Dr. Qiu is already looking ahead. Rather than pausing to capitalize on this achievement, he is going to continue to develop new cultivars through a different method: self-fertilization of Norton grapes.

“This is even more exciting,” Dr. Qiu said. “We are creating more possibilities.”

By using Norton’s own pollen to fertilize the flowers, the team is generating a wide range of genetically diverse offspring, and nearly 400 new seedlings have already been planted at the Fruit Experiment Station; each could be a potential breakthrough.

This is ongoing work that reflects a broader philosophy that defines Dr. Qiu’s approach. Innovation is not a destination, but a continuous process.

“We are not going to hold on,” said Dr. Qiu. “We keep developing more cultivars.”

For researchers like Howard, that kind of commitment underscores both the challenge and the reward of agricultural science.

“It takes a long time, and it’s

expensive,” said Howard. “But when you finally get something that works, something that’s really good, it makes it worth it.”

### Stepping Stone

The monumental development of Norton Blanc is more than just a scientific achievement. It is a testament to the persistence, collaboration and the willingness to invest years into an uncertain outcome. It also highlights the importance of research in shaping the future of agriculture, particularly in regions where there is an environmental challenge demanding many creative solutions.

For Missouri grape growers, it can offer hope, a grape that can thrive where others fail, and a wine that can compete on a broader and larger stage. For Dr. Qiu, it is both a milestone and a stepping stone.

As some of the vines continue to grow in the fields of the Fruit Experiment Station, so does the vision that began in 2005. Each with a new seedling, the possibilities expand, promising what could be a future where innovation continues, one grape at a time.



Headshot of Dr. Wenping Qiu.

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“You don’t have to know all the answers—but be willing to ask the people who do.”



How the Darr College of Agriculture shaped Jamie Rogers

# Ag Bear

# Big Impact

On any given day in Strafford, Missouri, bulls move through a carefully managed collection schedule. Semen tanks are filled for shipment across the country and around the world and customers call with questions about new breeding strategies. At the center of all of it is Jamie Rogers, an educator at heart, entrepreneur by calling and a proud graduate of the William H. Darr College of Agriculture at Missouri State University.

For Jamie, the road to becoming a co-owner and operating ShowMe Genetic Services began long before the day she signed the business loan or drafted a marketing plan. It began during a campus visit to Missouri State in the

fall of her senior year in high school.

“I had great visits with current Darr College of Ag students,” Jamie recalled. “A couple were mentors and past State FFA Officers. Those talks opened my eyes to the opportunities available and helped me feel like I would have a great network at MSU.”

That sense of belonging simply mattered to Jamie. She earned the Presidential Scholarship and was elected as the Missouri FFA State President, which made her decision even clearer. A full ride allowed her to stay close to home—close to her family’s farm—while serving FFA members across the state. During her freshman year

alone, she traveled 124 days as the State FFA President while taking 18 credit hours each semester.

Balancing that kind of schedule required discipline. It also demanded a campus community that understood leadership, agriculture and service.

“That network was huge.” “I could be present for FFA events and still feel supported academically.”

Jamie had chosen to major in Agricultural Education, a decision that she says provided the knowledge she later relied on as a business owner. Although she did not teach forever, the coursework exposed her to animal science, leadership development,

communications and program management—skills that would prove to be her foundation.

## **Hands-on learning defined her time at Darr**

In Dr. Tommy Perkins’ animal science classes, students were not just reading about beef production; they were practicing it every day. Jamie remembers traveling to Pinegar Limousin to gain hands-on experience with carcass ultrasounding. In the beef production class, they broke heifers to lead, clipped and prepared them for shows, exhibited them, and developed marketing materials to sell the cattle.

“We weren’t just sitting in a classroom, we were doing the work.” Jamie stated.

That “learn by doing” approach is now featured in how she and her husband, Steven, operate their business. Established in October 2019, ShowMe Genetic Services is a CSS-certified custom semen collection facility providing collection, storage, shipping, embryo transfer options and retail supplies to beef producers. Located in the heart of cow-calf country, the facility serves customers locally, nationally and internationally.

Their mission is very clear: create customer success in the beef cattle industry.

Much of that mission mirrors Jamie’s preparation as an educator in the classroom. Through practicum and student teaching placements arranged

by Dr. Jim Hutter, she was intentionally challenged.

“He sent me to programs where I could work on my weaknesses, fill in gaps I hadn’t experienced, and use my strengths to be a positive contribution,” she said.

Her practicum experience at Dadeville High School with Dana Kimmons and her student teaching at Aurora High School with Jim Spencer and Craig Grisham placed her alongside some of the top agricultural educators. The expectation was excellence in lesson planning, delivery, classroom management and leadership.

Today, while the classroom is no longer her job, Jamie still teaches every day.

“A lot of our day-to-day



“We weren’t just sitting in a classroom, we were doing the work.”

journey. As a high school agriculture teacher and FFA advisor, she leaned heavily on fellow graduates for advice and collaboration. Many of those same alumni are now customers of ShowMe Genetic Services.

“We love to hire Darr College of Ag alums. They’re challenged academically, but they’re also developed as leaders and workers. Their work ethic is second to none.”

**Those impacts are shared and showcased to the employees**

“As a fellow MSU alumni, it’s empowering to work for a company who believes in integrity and determination. Her family values are inspiring,” added Cassie Allscheid, employee of ShowMe Genetic Services.

The connection is a cycle. Alumni support the students. Students become graduates. Graduates return as employers, donors and mentors. It is the perfect cycle.

Jamie herself served for several years on the founding committee that helped restart the Ag Alumni organization and the Annual Ag Celebration, an event designed to connect alumni, donors, students and industry leaders.

“There was definitely a sense of belonging when I was a student. That developed into lifelong loyalty.”

involves educating customers on the bull collection process. Our main goal is to help customers be successful in the beef business—whether that’s in the pasture, the show ring or the feedlot.”

**If experimental learning shaped her skillset, mentorship shaped her leadership philosophy**

Dr. Anson Elliott, a longtime Missouri State University emeritus professor, served 36 years as director of the William H. Darr School of Agriculture and helped its transition into a college in 2016. Along the way, he introduced her to agricultural leaders, alumni and donors, creating opportunities for her to lead, speak and network within and beyond the college.

“His heart for students and making the college the best are unmatched,” Jamie said.

His influence was so significant that Jamie and Steven named their oldest son Elliott, Eli, in honor of Dr. Elliot.

Beyond the classroom, Missouri State provided

moments that stretched her confidence in unexpected ways. One of the more memorable was when Jamie testified to the Missouri legislature alongside Dr. Elliot and Past President Clif Smart in support of the university name change.

“Not only did I have to muster the confidence to testify,” detailed Jamie, “I had to develop arguments that helped legislators see the value and impact that change would make for the university and our state.”

That experience of advocating publicly, articulating a vision and defending a cause she believed in, paralleled the advocacy required in business ownership needed today. Whether navigating regulatory requirements for semen export or championing the needs of cattle producers, Jamie credits Missouri State with strengthening her ability to speak up and stand firm.

The alumni of Darr the College of Agriculture community have continued to influence her professional

That loyalty is evident today not only in her service to the college but also in the business. Alongside operating the collection facility, they manage a purebred and commercial Red Angus operation with Jamie’s father. They are raising three children, Elliott (Eli), Ethan, and Whitley, with the same values that guided them through college and into entrepreneurship.

“Know your priorities,” Jamie tells current students. “God, family, and agriculture — in that order.”

Faith played a very significant role during her college years. Through involvement in the Potter’s House campus ministry, she was discipled by mentors and built lifelong friendships within agriculture. Those relationships, she says, created a network she still leans on for counsel and opportunity.

“Put God first and be willing to ask questions,” Jamie said, “You don’t have to know all the answers — but be willing to ask the people who do.”

**Work ethic defines what she calls “The Darr Difference”**

To Jamie, it means so much more than a degree. It means being challenged to solve real-world problems. It means learning to treat others with respect. It means preparing not just for a job, but for leadership.

Her advice to students is practical and direct: Take every opportunity and take it to the fullest and show up at your best. Understand that “work” is not a bad four-letter word. Know your goals and get up every day

working toward them.

Those three principles shape how ShowMe Genetic Services operates today. As a CSS-certified facility, the team adheres to strict quality control protocols, emphasizes focused care of bulls and maintains detailed communication with customers. Their vision is to create a multitude of winners in the beef industry, helping clients achieve genetic and marketing goals that sustain operations for generations.

“Keeping the family in the farm and the farm in our family,” Jamie said, quoting her favorite sayings.

That philosophy mirrors the culture she experienced at Darr, where faculty knew students by name, where opportunities were personal and where preparation was practical.

From traveling 124 days as the Missouri FFA President to testifying before legislators,

from breaking heifers in beef production class to drafting a business plan for her hometown bull stud, Jamie’s path reflects the transformative power of agricultural education done well.

The Darr College of Agriculture did much more than prepare her for a career. It was what connected her to mentors who still influence her life. It equipped her with hands-on skills she uses every day. It instilled her confidence to lead, advocate and build.

In Strafford, as shipments leave the facility and customers call with breeding plans for the next generation of calves, the impact of that education is tangible.

For Jamie Rogers, being an Ag Bear is not just part of her résumé. It is part of her story, and the foundation of the legacy she is building in the beef industry with her family.



View inside of a large semen storage tank. Photo by Colin McIntyre

# FINDING YOUR PLACE

How connection, support and shared purpose turn the Darr College of Agriculture into more than a campus.



For many students, college is a place of transition. A new environment, new people and sometimes new roommates. But for students in Missouri State University's Darr College of Agriculture, the transition feels a little different to them. For them, Darr is not just a place where classes are held—it is a place that feels like home.

## A first impression that lasts

That sense of home starts with the people. From the moment students set foot into a building on the Darr campus, they are met with a welcoming environment. Sophomore

Willow McPeek recalls feeling that connection right away. "Darr has felt like home since the very first time I visited," she said. "The teachers, even those I didn't have classes with, took the time to learn who I was, remember my name, and listen to my story."

## Built on people and connections

That personal connection is one felt amongst all class levels. Junior Samantha Kaufman said, "The people are what make Darr home. Whether it be faculty,

staff, students or friends of the college, there is always a welcoming smile and someone ready to spark a conversation." Darr is more than classrooms and arenas; it is a place where students have a home away from home. Where everyone, from teachers to students, makes everyone feel welcome.

Even for students who are not physically in Darr often,

“I’m not just a number here—I’m me, with my ideas and dreams.” -Corder

the sense of home remains strong. Junior Kinsley

Keeling, a hospitality student, said her time on the Agriculture Ambassadors team has exposed her to many new experiences and people. "Darr makes me feel like I am supported through every decision I make towards my career because the staff and faculty are truly present for each student." She continues to say, "Everyone in the department acknowledges that we are the future of Agriculture and Hospitality, so they make a tremendous effort to guide us along the way."

## Support beyond the classroom

Most students can attribute a staff member for playing a big role in shaping their experience. They often express how impactful the teachers and staff are in going above and beyond for their students. Junior Kylie Scrivner pointed to one staff member in particular, Carrie Crews or better known to most as 'Mama Carrie'. "From the moment I walked into Darr,



“The teachers, even those I didn't have classes with, took the time to learn who I was, remember my name, and listen to my story.” - McPeek

Carrie has always met me with a smile and a solution to any problem I might bring her way." Scrivner reflects that as an Ag Education major, she may not be at Darr often, but when she is, Carrie is the first person she finds.

For seniors, that support becomes even more meaningful as they near the end of their college journey. Senior Rose Corder described feeling uncertain and terrified fresh out of high school. She reflected on one person in particular, Dr. Melissa Bledsoe, Dean of the Darr College of Agriculture, who left a lasting impact. "She helped me learn that at Darr, you aren't just a student, but you truly are the future of agriculture. Your ideas, dreams, and passions all help build up the university and agriculture." Corder states that she is not just a number at Missouri State—she is a person with ideas and dreams that she attributes to Darr helping her achieve.

## A shared purpose

Beyond support, students also highlighted a common understanding amongst their

peers. Junior Emily King says, "Darr feels like home because it's a place where hard

work is understood without explanation." She continues by stating, "It's where effort has meaning, passion is shared, and



everyone feels like family, whether you've been there for years or just arrived." She accredits Darr with reminding her of why she is there in the first

place and the reason why she continues to pursue it.

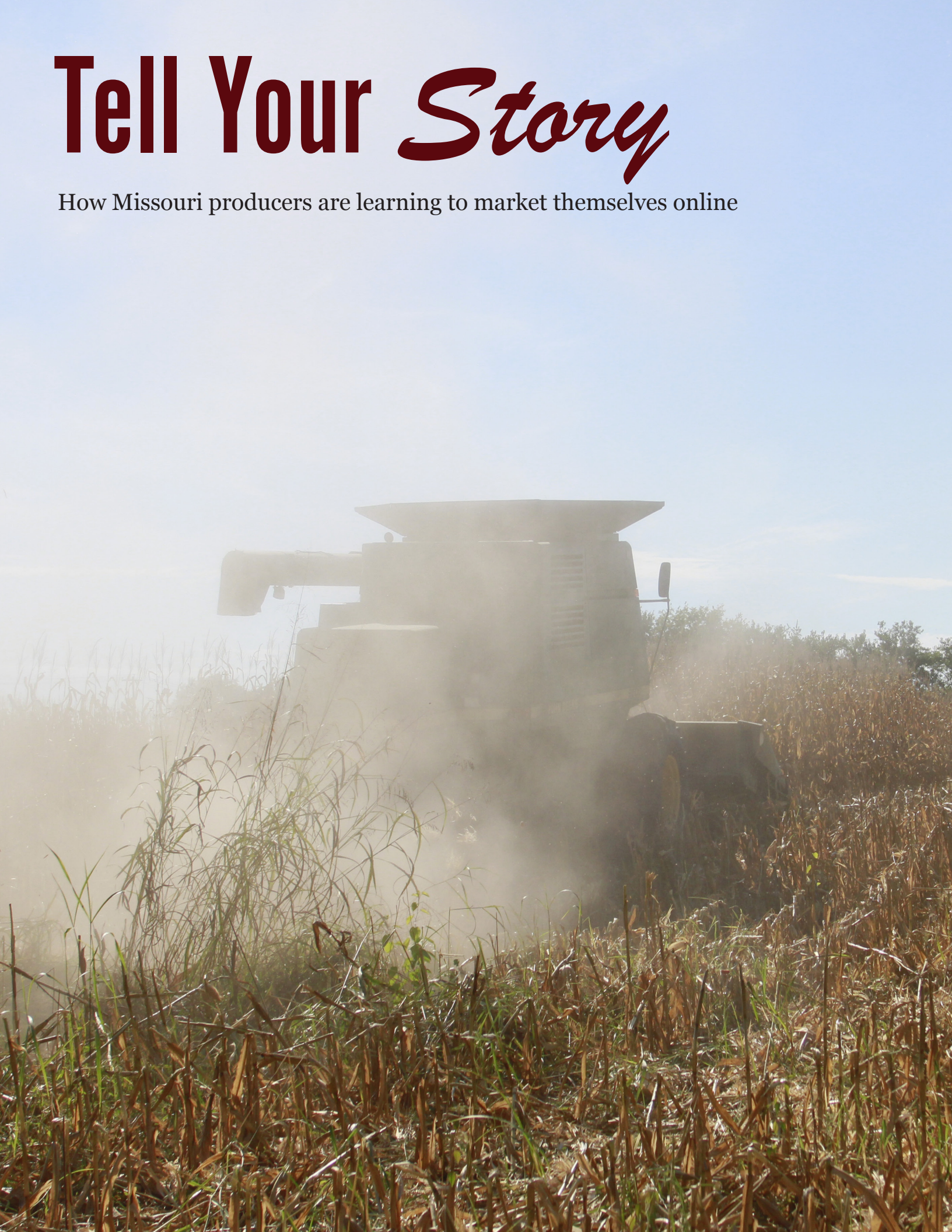
The combination of connection, support and shared purpose is what transcends Darr beyond just a college. It becomes a place where students are not another number in the statistics, but rather individuals whose goals, ideas and passions are both recognized and celebrated.

## More than a college

At its core, Darr represents more than just education in the world of agriculture. It represents community, and for the students who walk through its many halls, that community is what truly makes it feel like home.

# Tell Your Story

How Missouri producers are learning to market themselves online



For many producers, the workday does not end when they leave the field. It continues behind a screen, trying to keep up with social media, respond to customers and update their websites. The industry that once relied on word of mouth now runs on digital communication, something many producers are now trying to figure out on their own.

Seeing the growing need for support as producers' negative digital communications, Dr. Christine Sudbrock, Associate Professor and Dr. Michelle Santiago, Agriculture Department Chair at University of Central Missouri, worked together to create a producer-focused educational program.

## **Building a Program with Purpose**

The program was funded by the Missouri Agricultural and Small Business Development Authority Show-Me Entrepreneurial Grants for \$226,341, with Missouri State University matching that amount with \$69,612. Dr. Sudbrock and Dr. Santiago served as project co-directors, guiding the program's development and outreach. Clara Dickinson agricultural communications instructor was hired on at Missouri State through the grant to serve as the program's coordinator, planning and leading each of the educational workshops.

Many producers still rely on word of mouth to spread information about their businesses. But as technology continues to evolve, online communication skills are needed to keep pace, and that is where "Enhancing

Digital Communication and Marketing for Missouri Food Entrepreneurs" comes in.

Agricultural communication plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between producers and consumers. While producers understand the value and quality of their products, consumers often rely on what they see online to make purchasing decisions. Without clear, consistent communication, many high-quality products do not get the recognition they deserve. In today's market, telling the story behind the product can be just as important as the product itself. Consumers want to know how it was grown, who produced it and why it matters to them.

## **Designed Around Producers' Needs**

Before the grant was awarded, surveys went out to identify what producers struggled with most. Once the workshops began, Dickinson and UCM co-host Jill Robertson

were able to narrow the topics further. Each session opened with a conversation that let attendees express the specific areas where they needed help, a necessary flexibility given that some participants had no online marketing experience while others had years.

From there, workshops focused on practical skills producers could apply immediately. Social media management, email marketing and website development were frequent topics. Social media drew particular interest, given how quickly platforms change and how much attention they demand. Email content was another concern; producers wanted their messages to stand out rather than get deleted.

"Producers wanted to make sure they sent productive emails with engagement instead of being another spam email that nobody reads or deletes," says Dickinson.

During the workshops,

## CONNECTIONS

SMALL AG PRODUCER WORKSHOPS



collaboration becomes a key component of the learning process. Dickinson and Robertson created an environment in which the producers could learn not only from them but from each other. They could share tips and swap advice to give each other a new perspective. The flexibility of the workshops also played a big role in their success. Rather than setting a strict agenda for each meeting, Dickinson and Robertson adapted each one to the producers' needs.

"When all producers arrived, there would be a get-to-know-you intro, which helped the attendees address their needs/wants out of the workshop and challenges they were trying to overcome," explained Dickinson. They were then able to adjust their plans accordingly to suit what the producers needed from them the most.

### Finding What Works

As for social media, producers were concerned about how to create a schedule that would allow them to be present on multiple platforms and managing a website without being overwhelmed.

However, the workshops



emphasized the importance of finding what works best for each business as an individual. For some producers, focusing on the social media side was more effective for their business than creating a website without an online store to accompany it.

"Everyone feels pressured to have a website, so they all ask a lot of questions about where to start with building one," Dickinson says. "But for many, a website will not actually gain sales unless they have an active online store."

The program also helped producers learn different ways to get creative with their content. For example, during the slower months, a flower farmer can post behind-the-scenes content to engage their viewers. Another idea the program emphasized was to show the planning and daily operations to give customers an insight into their business. Strategies like this help to maintain that viewer engagement year-round, which aids in creating a stronger bond between the customer and the producer.

### From Overwhelmed to Empowered

Although measurable results can take time, there were positive impacts from the program seen early on. Dickinson and Robertson watched the producers' confidence grow as the number of workshops they attended increased. It was seen through an improvement in their marketing abilities and a higher audience engagement. A few perishable goods producers were even able to share their remaining products online after an in-person market preventing a loss of product and profit.

For many producers, the biggest change was not solely in their product sales but in their skillset. What once felt daunting and impossible has now become manageable with the right tools and strategies. Dickinson describes these breakthrough moments in a few ways. Some producers realized that one small tool could make their lives so much easier; they just needed to learn about it. While others realized that they could take part of the load off their by implementing better management strategies.

These 'aha' moments helped the producers to feel more confident in their capabilities and gave them more control over how they presented their business to the public.

### Impact Beyond the Workshop

The program's efforts reach beyond individual businesses into the broader community. As interest in shopping locally grows, producers need to make their presence known, because if customers don't know a business exists, they'll shop

**"We are seeing a big push in recent years amongst consumers in the shop-local movement." - Dickinson**

somewhere familiar instead.

"If consumers do not know what markets or businesses exist in their area, they will continue to shop where they know they can get the products they want," said Dickinson

This is especially important for the local food systems. Agriculture is an important part of Missouri's economy.

"The SEGA grants are helping to make sure our producers, both the small and large-scale operations, can continue to be successful. Which in turn ensures we have reliable and affordable food." Dickinson stated.

### Where it All Leads

After two years the grant funding came to an end in December 2025. However, recordings of workshop content remain available online, and producers can still reach out to Dickinson and Robertson for guidance. While the workshops may have concluded, the knowledge and confidence gained by the producers will carry over into their businesses and communities. So, as technology continues to evolve, they can as well. The long-term impact of this program goes beyond marketing skills, though. It empowers all

generations of producers to take ownership of their stories, to connect with their communities, and strengthen the agricultural community.

Ultimately, the Enhancing Digital Communication and Marketing for Missouri Food Entrepreneurs program highlighted the importance of communication in agriculture. As the community continues to evolve, so does the importance of sharing producers' stories. This is what sets them apart from others and draws the customers in. It allows local producers to be supported while also highlighting the importance of community.

Programs like this ensure Missouri producers are better equipped to do just that, supporting not only their individual success but the future of agriculture as a whole.



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# WHERE SOIL MEETS SERVICE

## Hannah Rockers' Peace Corps Journey

For many students, global food systems are something they encounter through lectures, case studies and statistics in a textbook. For Hannah Rockers, global agriculture became a daily personal experience—one shaped by muddy fields, old farming tools and community engagement.

Her journey began with a willingness to serve wherever needed and before long, she was preparing for a move halfway across the world to Uganda. This nation quickly reshaped how she viewed agriculture, service and family.

For students and faculty in the Darr College of Agriculture,

Rockers' story offers a reminder that global agriculture is not just an abstract system of trade and production, but a network of real people who depend heavily on the soil beneath their feet, the neighbors next-door and the clouds above their heads.

### Saying Yes to Adventure

Unlike many volunteers, Rockers did not select a specific country when she applied to serve with the Peace Corps. Instead, she chose the organization's, "serve where you are needed" option when applying.

"I actually didn't decide where I would serve," Rockers explained. "You can apply for

a specific location," however, "applicants who pick specific places don't always get those spots. I did the 'serve where you're needed' option, and I knew pretty quickly that I was being considered for Uganda."

One seemingly simple choice quickly turned into an opportunity that would reshape how she viewed food systems, education and development.

### A 25 Hour Journey to a New Home

Rockers arrived in East Africa with her volunteer cohort after a 25-hour journey from Washington, D.C. The team landed in Entebbe, Uganda where other Peace Corps staff met them to gather luggage and

bring everyone to pre-service training.

"Arriving in Uganda is a bit of a blur," Rockers said. "We were exhausted. But I remember looking out the bus window and thinking about how beautiful everything looked."

That quiet moment watching landscapes pass by marked the beginning of becoming immersed in a community where agriculture is not an academic major or a career choice, but a daily responsibility shared by every household.

### Successful Agriculture Starts With People

During her service, Rockers worked closely with all different types of people: farmers, local youth and community members. Her work placed less of an emphasis on sharing new production strategies and developing technology and more on strengthening everyday skills that would help families thrive.

Rockers' teaching seminars covered, "trainings related to nutrition, business and entrepreneurship skills-saving, marketing and book-keeping." She also spent time with locals researching how to produce "natural fertilizers and pesticides from locally available materials and products."

Along with these training and research developments, she also spent lots of time working in schools. Rockers led sessions for secondary students (high school age children) on saving and money management, goal-setting and digital literacy. She co-facilitated a grant that supported a Youth Entrepreneurship Camp, which gives students hands-on



experience in business planning. Since many students at that age are already considering how they can help support their family's needs, this camp helps aid in entrepreneurial teachings and guides students to start successful jobs.

At the primary school level (elementary and middle school ages), Rockers organized Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) day to promote literacy within the community and the next generation.

"I didn't lead trainings every day," Rockers explained. "Usually, I would prepare for a training a couple days in advance. Once I had materials ready, I could reuse them with other groups." What stood out to Rockers during her

day-to-day activities was how closely education, income and food were linked. Teaching students how to save money or start small businesses always overlapped with teaching about nutrition or production. Everything was intertwined.

### Farming Without Fences

For someone raised and educated around Missouri agriculture and U.S. crop production, the contrast between farming systems in Uganda was immediate for Rockers.

"In Missouri and the U.S., most crop and livestock farming is done on a large scale and requires tractors, combines and a large piece of land," Rockers explained. In contrast, "Uganda crop and livestock farming are





A local corn field the community tills together  
Photo Courtesy of Hannah Rockers

typically much smaller scale. Most farmers don't have access to machinery, so everything is done by hand."

Livestock management looked very different as well. "Livestock usually just roam," Rockers stated. "They aren't normally fenced. Also, if someone had 10 cows, that would be considered a lot."

In Uganda, fields were smaller, large equipment was unavailable and every step from planting to harvest relied on family and community labor. While the pace of work was slower and production quantity was lower, for Rockers, it was a powerful reminder that scale of size does not determine value and these plots of land were the backbone of community survival.

### Seasons Determine Success

In the United States, crops are grown all year round in different regions of the

country. It is important to note, however, that many other areas of the world rely heavily on weather conditions to produce food. Uganda is no different. In Uganda, the agriculture calendar revolves around rainy and dry seasons. This means there is only two main growing and harvest cycles each year. But those seasons are extremely unpredictable and often unforgiving.

"Droughts, floods and in some areas, landslides are all huge concerns for producers," Rockers explained. A delayed rainy season can prevent timely planting and heavy rainfall can damage crops and wash away soil and important nutrients. In Uganda, crop insurance and irrigation systems are hard to come by, so farmers and their families carry all the risk themselves.

Still, Rockers observed many low-cost, practical strategies to

help families build resilience and stability. Many households used large barrels or empty buckets to collect rainwater for dry periods. Farmers also used out-of-the-box techniques to maximize yields on smaller areas of land. "Soil is put into mounds for growing potatoes," Rockers stated, "to improve drainage and help farmers utilize all possible space."

While these methods may have seemed unconventional, these small adjustments significantly affect food availability in a community where every harvest matters.

### New Practices and Old Habits

In her host community, most formal farming and food-related trainings were delivered through non-governmental organization. As a Peace Corps volunteer, Rockers partnered with many local organizations to help facilitate their sessions as well as her own.

The trainings created opportunities for farmers and families to learn about broader agriculture techniques, deepen understanding of practical production skills, network with others and further support entrepreneurial endeavors. Rockers and her team also provided opportunities for peer discussion and time to solve local problems as a united community.

"Many people are set in their ways," Rockers said. "Sometimes new practices require a bigger investment- money, time, or resources- that people just aren't always able or willing to make."

Even when a method may improve long-term outcomes, the short-term risks can feel overwhelming for families already operating with high risk and narrow margins. Yet, Rockers believes deeply in the power of small, consistent efforts and community engagement. "My experiences in Uganda definitely shaped my thoughts on community development," Rockers explained. "It feels more personal and showed me how small things can ripple throughout the community. I know other volunteers and I sometimes felt like our work wasn't making much impact, but there were definitely times when it was clear that our service was much more impactful than we realized."

### Food Security from the Ground Up

Living inside a food system built almost entirely on local production transformed Rockers' understanding of global agriculture. "In Missouri,

a lot of the food we eat comes from other states and even other countries," Rockers said. "That gives us a lot of variety and allows us to make choices about what we can eat."

In all villages she visited, imported foods were very rare. Most meals were built around what families could grow nearby. "Almost all of the food was grown locally," Rockers explained. "Very few foods were imported and the ones that were, usually came from nearby countries."

As a result of this, many families ate the same foods day after day. "The limited variety often lead to malnutrition," Rockers said. For Rockers, this huge difference highlighted an important distinction between having enough food and having nutritious food, a consistent discrepancy many people do not fully think about. This issue continues to shape global conversations surrounding food security and further agricultural development.

### A Message for our Future

Rockers is a graduate of Missouri State University, and she believes students in the college of agriculture are in a unique position to engage with global food challenges. If she had 30 seconds to speak to every agriculture student on campus, her message would be full of honesty and encouragement.

"Serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer is not for everyone," Rockers said. "It really is the toughest job you'll ever love. But if you have the opportunity to travel and experience more of

the world, take it. You'll be glad you did."

For the Darr College of Agriculture community, Rockers' story is both engaging and grounding. It shows that agriculture, whether here at home in Missouri or on a small community plot in Uganda, is ultimately about people.

Agriculture is about the students who miss school to help with harvest, parents who rely on garden products to sustain family life and farmers who watch the sky hoping rain will fall exactly on time. And volunteers who arrive unsure of what they will find but leave with a deeper understanding of how food, education and opportunities are woven together.

From Missouri to Matooke, Hannah Rockers' journey reminds us that global agriculture is not something happening far away, but a shared experience that unites communities together.



# Planting the Seeds of Success

How SSAC helps students grow



For students entering Missouri State University's Darr College of Agriculture, the excitement of a new academic journey is often paired with uncertainty. Choosing classes, exploring career paths and adjusting to college life can feel overwhelming, especially in those first few critical semesters. But within the Darr College of Agriculture, a growing resource is reshaping the experience, offering guidance, encouragement and a sense of direction and support from day one.

The Student Success and Advisement Center (SSAC) was created with a clear purpose: to provide consistent, accessible and meaningful support for every student. Its development was part of a broader initiative across Missouri State University to strengthen advising systems and ensure students, especially first-year and transfer students, have a strong foundation. Within the Darr College of Agriculture, leadership recognized that students needed more than just scheduling classes. They needed a place

that could support their full journey. That vision quickly took shape in the SSAC, which now serves as a central hub for student development that extends far beyond course selection.

## A Mission Focused on the Whole Student

At the heart of the center is a mission to guide students from their earliest moments on campus through graduation. Whether it is during SOAR (Student Orientation, Advisement and Registration)

or in the final steps toward commencement, advisors are there to help students navigate each stage with confidence.

Using advising models like Appreciative Advising and Self-Authorship, the SSAC encourages students to reflect on their goals, values and

“Students are the decision-maker in their own educational journey.” - Walker

interests. Then works with students to connect those insights to opportunities within agriculture and hospitality industries.

“We help make sure they know their options, have a framework for weighing their values and options, and feel confident in making those choices for themselves,” said Kimmy Walker Director of the Darr College of Agriculture Student Success and Advisement Center.

This approach aligns closely with the Darr College of Agriculture's broader mission to prepare graduates who are not only knowledgeable but adaptable and driven.

## Building a Strong Academic Foundation

Academic advising remains the cornerstone of the SSAC's work. Every incoming student is paired with a professional advisor who helps them understand degree requirements, plan coursework and connect academic choices to long-term career goals.

As students' progress, they transition to a faculty advisor within their major. However,

the SSAC remains involved as a secondary support system, ensuring students continue to have access to guidance and resources.

“Transitions can be tough, we build genuine relationships with students,” Walker shared. “To help make this a positive

transition, we tell students early on about this plan, we take their career goals into consideration when pairing them with a faculty advisor, and the professional staff advisors stay on their records as a secondary advisor as an additional level of support.”

To enhance the advising experience, the center has introduced several new tools. Program guides help students better understand their academic paths, while a centralized Brightspace page provides access to internships, job opportunities and professional development resources. A Student Success Handbook, currently in development, aims to bring all these elements together in one comprehensive guide.

## Creating Access and Opportunity

Accessibility is one of the defining features of the SSAC. Students can schedule appointments online at any time, making it easier to fit advising into busy schedules. At the same time, advisors maintain an open-door policy to welcome students who need quick answers or immediate support.

“We fully recognize that urgent matters come up,” Walker explained. “It's not uncommon for students to pop in with quick questions, and we are always happy to help with those.”

This flexibility has helped foster a culture of connection and trust. While advising appointments are required at least once a semester, many students choose to meet more frequently—an indication that they see the center as a reliable and approachable resource.

## Connecting Classroom to Career

Beyond academics, the SSAC plays a vital role in preparing students for life after college. Through initiatives like the annual Ag Career Fair and the AGR 490: Career Prep in Agriculture course, students are encouraged to explore career paths, build professional skills and connect with industry partners. The center also serves as a bridge between students, faculty and organizations to ensure support is both academically relevant and career focused.

“Collaboration is at the heart of the center!” - Walker

“We would not be successful without the amazing encouragement and support we receive from faculty, leadership and partners. We continue to regularly attend faculty and college meetings to stay in the know and provide input on how decisions directly impact students,” said walker

### Supporting Students Through Challenges

College life is not always smooth and the SSAC is designed to support students during difficult moments as well. Advisors conduct midterm grade checks, work with students returning from academic suspension and help connect individuals to campus resources.

For students who may feel hesitant to ask for help, the center takes a proactive approach to focus on building personal relationships and creating an environment where seeking support feels natural.

Walker stated, "We strongly believe in connecting students directly to specific people. This makes seeking support so much more personal and less intimidating."

By emphasizing approachability and

understanding, the SSAC helps reduce barriers that might otherwise prevent students from reaching out.

### Looking Toward the Future

As the center continues to grow, its impact will be measured in both numbers and experiences. Retention rates, advising load balance and student feedback will all play a role in assessing success.

"We are always exploring—what keeps students from asking for help and how can we help remove those barriers." Walker explained.

Looking ahead, the SSAC aims to expand its partnerships with community colleges and industry leaders, further strengthening its role as a comprehensive support system. The goal is to become a central hub for student success, no matter where a student begins their journey.

### A Message to Students

At its core the Student Success and Advisement Center is built on a simple idea: students should never feel like they must figure things out alone.

"We are here to help and to support our ag students," Walker emphasized. "We would love to be a hub for all things student success in the college, no matter when and where someone started their educational journey."

In a field as dynamic and impactful as agriculture, that kind of support can make all the difference. By guiding students from their first steps on campus to their final moments before graduation, the SSAC is helping shape not just successful students, but confident and capable professionals ready to make their mark.



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## SAVE THE DATE

The Darr College of Agriculture's annual Ag. Expo connects high school students with the diverse careers available in the agricultural industry. Missouri State College of Ag. and industry professionals share firsthand experiences, career pathways and insights into their work. Students see how agriculture impacts everyday life and future career options.



Darr Agricultural Center  
2401 S. Kansas Expy  
Springfield, MO 65807

417-836-5054

[kelsieyoungsmith@missouristate.edu](mailto:kelsieyoungsmith@missouristate.edu)

# MORE THAN A MEETING

On any given day, you can find at least one student organization having a meeting either at Karls Hall, the Darr Agricultural Center or even off campus. These organizations are more than something to get involved in, they create opportunities for connection, leadership and hands-on experiences. With the wide ranges of interests within the college, students can find their place and help shape their future far beyond what happens in a classroom.

## MSU Ranch Horse Team

For Addie Hall, a freshman majoring in medical imaging, the Ranch Horse Team provided an opportunity to explore a new side of the equine industry. The team welcomes all levels of experience and even offers the use of the school horses for members. This year, the team earned reserve high-point collegiate team at the Tennessee Stock Horse Association championship show, creating what Hall describes as an “exciting, adventurous and supportive” environment.

## Forestry Club

Spencer Carney, a senior in natural resources, found a community in the Forestry Club

through a shared and continued passion for nature. Known for its timbersport competitions, including crosscut sawing and axe throwing, the club hosted its first conclave at Shealy Farms this year. Carney said the organization is “welcoming, fun and unique,” offering its members a place to grow and connect.

## Agriculture Communicators of Tomorrow

While some student organizations focus on industry connections, Agriculture Communicators of Tomorrow, or ACT, focuses on preparing students to tell agriculture’s story outside of the classroom. At Missouri State, the chapter provides hands-on opportunities for students to advance their skills in strategic communication, writing, design, photography and so much more. Under current leadership, the organization has placed an emphasis on professional development



and creating meaningful experiences that extend beyond the classroom. Whether through networking opportunities, workshops or industry exposure, ACT continues to equip its membership with the tools needed to communicate agriculture effectively.

## Collegiate Farm Bureau

For many, Missouri Farm Bureau is best known for its insurance. But beyond that, the organization is making an impact on college campuses through its collegiate programs. For Colin McIntyre, that impact is personal. A senior majoring in agriculture communications, McIntyre says Missouri Farm Bureau has been part of his life for as long as he can remember. Serving on the Collegiate Farm



Bureau executive team for the past three years, he has helped shape the organization’s presence on campus. From pioneering the Commodity Panel in the fall semester to assisting with the planning of the spring Ag Forum, McIntyre has played a key role in elevating the chapter. His leadership has helped set a new standard for Collegiate Farm Bureau at Missouri State.

## Cheese Club

Any student organization can be more than what meets the eye. For Lucas Struckhoff, a sophomore marketing major, the Cheese club is just that. With free cheeses offered at every meeting, the organization creates a relaxed space for students from all majors to connect. Struckhoff said that the most rewarding part has been bringing people together, describing the club as “cheesy,” full of “gouda-times” and truly “brie-lliant.”



## Sigma Alpha

Scholarship, leadership, fellowship and service—these pillars define the foundation of

Sigma Alpha, a professional agricultural sorority, and shape the experience of its members. At Missouri State, the

Alpha Xi chapter brings these values to life through opportunities

that encourage both personal and professional growth. Members are challenged to excel academically, step into leadership roles and build meaningful connections within the organization and beyond. Through philanthropy events, leadership programming and active involvement within the Darr College of Agriculture,

Sigma Alpha continues to cultivate a strong sense of purpose among its members. The chapter’s commitment to its pillars creates an environment

where women in agriculture are supported, empowered and prepared for their future careers.



## Alpha Gamma Rho

When you think of a fraternity, you think of the big houses on Greek Row. But for Carter Gulick, a junior majoring in wildlife conservation, the brotherhood of Alpha Gamma Rho is so much more. Beyond the social aspects, the fraternity emphasizes leadership and professional development. Gulick found an unexpected sense of belonging and said “that the organization has helped him build confidence while fostering a brotherhood that is centered on leadership and professionalism.”

# SEEING A DARR DIFFERENCE



## A DAY OF SERVICE

By mid-morning on March 7, 2026 the Darr Agriculture Center Agricultural Innovation Hub was alive with excitement.

Students in work clothes, alumni conversing with past peers and conversations that carried easily across generations. The sense that the day to come was about more than just showing up—it was about giving back.

### More than just showing up

Darr Difference Day marks a new tradition for the Missouri State University Darr College of Agriculture. Designed to bring together students, alumni and supporters, the inaugural event highlighted celebration, connections and most importantly, service that reflected the heart of the college itself.

“The biggest thing for me was getting to work alongside alumni and faculty you don’t normally get to interact with,” said Macy Stauffer, a junior agriculture education major. “Most campus events are just students with students, but this brought everyone together.”

### Bringing generations together

That sense of connection extended beyond the students.

“It highlights the best part of working at Missouri State—getting to connect with students outside of the classroom and get to know them better,” said Nichole Busdieker-Jesse, an

agriculture business professor within the Darr College of Agriculture. “To be able to do that and give back together



was a fantastic experience.”

### Building the future of agriculture

The ribbon cutting and dedication of the Agricultural Innovation Hub and Small Animal Education Center celebrated the spaces that have started to shape the next generation of agricultural leaders.

Missouri State University President Richard “Biff” Williams joined Bill and Virginia Darr, alongside the Darr family, foundation staff and university leaders, to formally recognize the college’s namesake and the official opening of the facilities.

“The small animal education center was built to support the growing interest in animal science and pre-veterinary programs,” said Dr. Melissa Bledsoe, Dean of the Darr

College of Agriculture. “It allows students to work with animals over a longer period of time, giving them a completely different, more hands-on experience.”

“Having these facilities gives student more opportunities and more hands-on experience,” Stauffer said. “It allows us to learn directly from instructors here at Missouri State.”

“Seeing the facilities officially opened shows how the college is continuing to grow and create opportunities not just for students, but for the community as well,” said Haliey Baker, a freshmen agriculture education major.

Dr. Bledsoe said the Agricultural Innovation Hub fills a long-standing need within the college.

“If you ask the right people, it’s been 30 or 40 years in the making,” Dr. Bledsoe said. “It gives us the space to bring equipment in, teach agricultural mechanics, and integrate precision technology and innovation across all of our programs.”

“It was the start of the best kind of tradition—one that can leave an impact. -Busdieker-Jesse

The facilities on the Darr campus are more than expansion—they are a continued investment in hands-on learning and real-world experiences.

### **Where service took shape**

That investment was reflected not only in the ceremony, but in the volunteer work that came next.

Across the Darr campus, volunteers got to work. Projects took shape through teamwork and pride for the college. Students and Alumni alike worked side-by-side to create a full-circle experience that felt familiar and meaningful in giving back to a college that gives so much.

“Our group was not afraid to get in the mud and do what we could to make things better,” Busdieker-Jesse said. “We had a great time while doing it.”

“The opportunities I’ve had through the College of Agriculture have been incredible, so being able to give back and leave it better than I found it means a lot to me,” Stauffer said.

“Even though it felt like a small difference, I knew it was contributing to something bigger within the College of Agriculture,” Baker said.

### **A lasting impact**

Darr Difference Day was not just about completing service projects or attending the ceremony. It reinforced the values that define the college: leadership, stewardship and a commitment to the future of agriculture.

Dr. Bledsoe said she hopes the event continues to grow

as a defining tradition for the college.

“For the inaugural year, it knocked it out of the park,” she said. “It brought together students, faculty, alumni and supporters, and that exactly what we want it to be in the future—an opportunity to serve, but also to showcase who we are and what we stand for.”

“It was the start of the best kind of tradition—one that can leave an impact,” Busdieker-Jesse said. “It brought us all together and gave us the chance to leave things better than when we came, with a bit of time and elbow grease.”

“I would describe the day as impactful, because it brought together so many different parts of the college and created something that benefits future students,” Stauffer said.

The day concluded with a shared meal between volunteers where conversations lingered. It was in the final moments of the day of service where the impact of the day settled in.



For Dr. Bledsoe, the day also carried a sense of familiarity—one that connected the past and present generations of students.

“As a student, we were always engaged in service, whether that was in the community or for the college,” she said. “This felt like a return to that, and a reminder that those values are still being carried forward.”

“It’s something that can easily continue because there are so many ways for people to get involved,” Baker said. “It’s more than just a day of service—it’s something that will continue to impact students and the College of Agriculture in the future.”

### **The Darr Difference**

This was not a single event, but the beginning of something that will last.

Because the Darr difference is not built in one day. It is built in the people who show up, the work they do, and the community that they continue to grow.





# Built for What's Next

Inside Missouri State Agriculture's push to close the gap between classroom and career

Agriculture is changing fast, and Missouri State University's Darr College of Agriculture is keeping pace. New programs and facilities mean students are flying drones over test fields, designing sustainable tourism experiences and working hands-on with the technology shaping the industry, before they ever walk across the stage.

Missouri State's College of Agriculture recognized that as agriculture and related industries evolve, students need more than classroom knowledge to succeed. Employers expect graduates who can apply skills immediately, work across disciplines and engage thoughtfully with communities.

To meet that demand, the college launched the Ag Innovation Hub, created the

Certificate in Agriculture Technology and introduced the Tourism Management degree. These initiatives bring the university's public affairs mission to life by fostering community engagement, ethical leadership and cultural competence, while giving students the practical experience to thrive in their careers.

## A Facility Decades in the Making

The Agricultural Innovation Hub did not happen overnight. Faculty knew there was a gap in facilities, but designing a space to meet all the needs would take time. Prior to the Hub, students had to travel to other locations for certain learning experiences. When the Hub finally came together, it impressed students with the opportunities it offered. The facility was built to

provide real-world, authentic and fully immersive learning environments.

The shop space was built large enough to accommodate a full-size combine, allowing students to gather around machinery for hands-on instruction. The welding area is equipped with arc welding, MIG welding and TIG welding capabilities, along with plasma cutters and a CNC plasma table.

Every piece of equipment was carefully selected after faculty visited high school agricultural shops to observe what teachers were actively using and how they were teaching, ensuring the Hub reflects real-world practices.

"These facilities have been needed for a very long time. The facility allows us not only to offer the new certificate but increases our ability to

teach many of the principles of ag mechanics," said Matt Wommack, Assistant Professor.

A classroom was designed and built with flexibility so it can be converted into a computer lab as the program's technology needs evolve. That kind of forward-thinking design reflects the broader philosophy behind the Hub: build for where agriculture is going, not just where it has been.

## Closing the Gap Between Classroom and Career

For years, students graduating from Missouri State's agriculture programs had a solid foundation of knowledge, but access to hands-on experience was limited. As the agriculture industry evolves, skills like operating drones, mapping fields and applying precision inputs have become essential.



The College of Agriculture recognized that students need direct opportunities to practice these skills on campus to be fully prepared for the modern workforce.

The new Certificate in Agriculture Technology was developed in response to that need. Expected to be available in fall 2026, the certificate is designed to address the gap directly.

It consists of four courses, beginning with an introduction to the foundations of precision technology, then a deeper dive into digital land management and drone use in agriculture, and finally a capstone course to prepare students for the licensure exam. The certificate was deliberately structured with accessibility in mind.

No prerequisites are required for the first three

courses, meaning any undergraduate can enroll regardless of major. The only requirement is completing the first two courses before enrolling in the capstone.

### Tourism Education Arrives in Missouri

Missouri State's College of Agriculture is expanding on all fronts. Its Tourism Management program officially launched in spring 2026, offering a four-year degree unique among public institutions in Missouri.

Housed within the School of Hospitality and Agricultural Leadership and supported by the School of Earth, Environment, and Sustainability, the program blends multiple fields. Students study tourism through lenses of hospitality, geography, management, agriculture, sustainability and community development, treating these subjects as interconnected rather than isolated.

The curriculum begins with Understanding Travel and Tourism in the Modern World and progresses to applied coursework in destination development, hospitality marketing and event and venue management. A unique feature is the undergraduate certificate structure, allowing students to specialize in sustainable tourism, event planning, food and beverage operations, sport administration, agritourism, nonprofit leadership or

intercultural communication.

"Tourism naturally brings people, cultures and communities together. This program teaches students to approach tourism development responsibly and inclusively," said Dr. Yating Liang, Professor.

Students in the comprehensive option complete certificates in both specialized and integrated tourism areas, ensuring graduates are not only tourism specialists but

“This is the first four-year tourism management degree offered at a public higher education institution in the state.”

-Dr. Liang

broadly capable professionals. All students complete a required career development experience, either an internship or education abroad, and a public affairs capstone focused on applied problem-solving.

### What this Means for Students

Across both new programs, the common thread is workforce readiness. Both are designed to produce graduates who arrive having already done the work. Neither require students to know exactly where they're headed, only that they want to be better prepared when they get there.

Both programs are also notably flexible in who they serve. The Ag Technology certificate is designed to complement an existing undergraduate degree. The Tourism Management program welcomes first-year students,

transfer students, international students and those pursuing a second major.

### Looking Ahead

With the Agricultural Innovation Hub now open and the Tourism Management degree already welcoming its first cohort, The College of Agriculture is making a visible and durable commitment to the students who pass through it.

The Ag Technology certificate is working through its final approval stages and remains on track for a Fall 2026 launch.

The college looks forward to welcoming students into the new spaces and programs, and to seeing how the future workforce will benefit from these opportunities.



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