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North Carolina Agricultural and
Technical State University
School of Agriculture and
Environmental Sciences Newsletter
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Gray receives Outstanding Teacher Award

Dr. Benjamin Gray, a rural sociologist in the Department of Agribusiness, Applied Economics and Agriscience Education, is the recipient of the SAES's Outstanding Teacher Award for the academic year 2014-15.

A well-rounded academician whose substantial research and outreach efforts focus on rural poverty, especially in the Black Belt region of the Southeast, Gray nevertheless has always valued his role as teacher first and foremost.

"One of my goals is for students to gain a sincere appreciation for the subject, so, for instance, students may say they were not aware of the distinct differences that exist among rural residents when compared to urban residents. Bringing this type of awareness to students is very rewarding," he said.

Students and colleagues alike recognize and appreciate Gray's dedication to the classroom, as evidenced by students consistently ranking his instruction in the "excellent" range, and his consistently superior annual evaluations.

A colleague in his department, Dr. Donald McDowell, says of Gray: "He pushes his students very hard, but he pushes himself even harder. In the process, he develops excellent relationships with his students. His courses

are regarded as being among the most challenging courses they take, and at the same time, Benny is regarded as one of our most caring, helpful and dedicated professors."

In his writings and presentations, Gray often stresses that all sectors of society should pay more attention to the Black Belt, an agricultural region across the Southeast plagued by persistent poverty and containing a high proportion of African Americans. Among his many civic activities, Gray chairs the Southern Rural Development Center Technical Operational Advisory Committee. He has designed, conducted and analyzed numerous surveys through the SAES's Applied Social Research Laboratory, and has published dozens of refereed publications in the form of journal articles, technical reports, or conference proceedings and other publications. He has led or participated in research, capacity building and teaching projects that brought more than \$1.6 million to the University. Gray, whose Ph.D. is from N.C. State, joined the faculty as assistant professor in 2000. His climb up the academic ladder began at A&T in 1982. He has both bachelor's and master's degrees in agribusiness and economics from A&T.



Nutrition is focus of new program

The SAES continues to focus its resources on the Local Food and Health Initiative as evidenced by its newest academic major in Nutrition, Health and Wellness (NHW), which will be available to students seeking a bachelor's in Food and Nutritional Sciences starting fall 2015.

The new curriculum is responsive to the increasing emphasis on nutrition education in health care, as demonstrated by the latest forecast from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which predicts a robust 21 percent increase in jobs for nutritionists and dietitians through 2022. Experts attribute the higher-than-average demand for nutrition professionals to America's obesity epidemic, its rapidly aging population, and the Affordable Care Act, which has given millions of previously uninsured Americans access to health care for the first time.

The NHW concentration will provide students with a foundational science background in chemistry, anatomy, physiology, and microbiology, while incorporating courses in nutrition, food science, wellness, disease prevention, weight management, and metabolism.

Supplementing their classroom training are opportunities for NHW majors to gain hands on experiences in health care settings, child care centers, schools, research laboratories, and the food industry. The new major also meshes with two of the SAES's major initiatives, the Strong Families Build Strong Health Initiative as well as the SAES's Local Food and Health Initiative.

Nutrition professionals work in many settings, including hospitals, nursing homes, cafeterias and clinics. Some also pursue private practice. The median annual salary for the profession is currently \$55,240.

"We are delighted to offer this new option to our students, and anticipate that employers will readily recruit them upon graduation," said Dr. Valerie Giddings, chair of the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences.

For more information or to enroll, contact Dr. Giddings at 336-334-7850 or vlgiddin@ncat.edu.

Dr. Antoine J. Alston (left), the SAES's associate dean for Academic Studies, adds his endorsement to the Outstanding Teacher Award presented to Dr. Benjamin Gray.



Four SAES honors students represented their departments during the annual Student Awards program in April. Here are profiles of each of them:



The late Tom and Bettie Webster would be so proud — of that, their granddaughter **Jasmine Scott** is sure. Graduating with an agricultural-education degree and heading to work for USDA was prime occasion for reflection by this progeny of Rockingham County tobacco farmers; one who never envisioned agriculture in her own future.

“My grandfather had a fourth-grade education. My grandmother had a 10th-grade education. They married when they were 16, and they worked to have something,” says Scott, who was raised on part of the 100-acre farmstead that her late grandparents amassed.

Yet, the farm was no longer active as Scott was growing up and she had a skewed perspective of agricultural careers as: “A farmer in some overalls. Why would I do that? Why would I major in ag?”

Now, the newly minted agricultural major not only has the answer to her previous questions, she is the answer. Her agricultural awakening began with her mother’s encouragement to compete for an 1890 USDA scholarship, which Scott won for a four-year ride at A&T.

“Coming to the School of Ag and being within this industry,” says Scott, 21 “is one of the best decisions I’ve ever made in my life. Hands down.”

Scott’s academic career also includes two internships, study abroad, top honors in the N.C. Farm Bureau’s Collegiate Discussion Meet, and an undergraduate research assistantship with Dr. Kenrett Jefferson-Moore examining access to local or organic produce in the Piedmont. That assignment helped sharpen Scott’s analytical skills and aptitude for statistical research, preparing her for the job she is about to begin as a USDA financial analyst in Albuquerque, N.M.

“I give the School of Ag every piece of credit for giving me direction in finding a career,” Scott says. “The School of Ag is the best-kept secret on this campus. It’s like finding a jewel, a rare jewel.”



One of the fundamental lessons **Keegan Johnson** learned about research while getting his degree in laboratory animal science was “how to bounce back.”

“There’s a trial and error process to research,” says Johnson, “that guides you even when the outcome is not what you expected.”

If anyone is familiar with unexpected outcomes it’s Johnson, 23. He had been accepted by UNC-Charlotte but then fell in love with A&T after a visit during his spring break.

Initially, he majored in nursing as an artery to his goal of becoming a medical doctor. Johnson changed course again, though, after a friend recommended the Department of Animal Sciences and Dr. Tracy Hanner.

“He changed everything for me,” Johnson says of Hanner. “I’ve had the best professors on campus in the School of Agriculture. I would stand each and every one of them beside anybody in the University.”

Life in a military family exposed Johnson to different cultures and environments across the country and abroad. But A&T reflected the world to him in its own unique microcosm.

“I’d never seen this many different black cultures,” Johnson says. “It felt like every person I walked by, I knew. It made me feel welcome without really knowing them.”

“I stayed for a week and it got better and better each day. During the spring break while I was here, I actually applied to go here. I said ‘this is where I need to be.’”

Johnson is headed to Kansas State University for a research internship. His undergraduate research at A&T focused on respiratory diseases in swine, but Johnson isn’t sure if that will be his dedicated specialty in the years to come.

Becoming a doctor is still in his long-range plan, but now the pursuit is for a Ph.D. in an animal sciences field. Department of Animal Sciences faculty have so profoundly affected him that he wants to guide students in that same way.

“You get to help others,” Johnson says, “and that’s the main thing I wanted to do.”



On **Katie Pritchett’s** road to success it was the unconventional route that worked better for her, as evidenced by her recent degree in sustainable land management. A graduate of the SAES’s Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Design, Pritchett, 31, returns to Florida this summer for another internship with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. She will attend graduate school at N.C. State in the fall.

Before amassing academic momentum, Pritchett had a traditional trajectory that included attending college directly after high school. The Georgia native pursued environmental studies for two years at Warren Wilson College before conceding that she wasn’t focused.

“It just wasn’t time for me to be in college, but that doesn’t mean that college wasn’t for me,” Pritchett says.

She worked in garden centers and stayed abreast of environmental and land-use issues by taking community college classes. Noting her talent, one of her instructors at Alamance Community College recommended A&T. Pritchett was further inspired after Dr. Antoine J. Alston, the SAES associate dean for academic studies, came to speak at the community college.

At A&T, Pritchett credits Dr. Charles Raczkowski with helping her chart a successful career path. After graduate school, she’d like to continue working in soil-sciences disciplines, as a conservationist and ultimately as a district or area conservationist.

“I have an affinity for nature and the environment that was instilled in me at a young age from my parents,” says Pritchett, whose parting advice to other students is to help manage the environment. “We need to understand how important natural resource conservation is. People don’t usually think of soil as a natural resource but it’s where our food comes from.”



Wesley Wolfe’s college plan was set: major in criminal justice and then go to law school. But once at A&T, he went to a campus job fair, discovered information about fashion design, and found his perfect fit.

“I knew instantly that was my passion and I changed my major,” Wolfe says.

Three years since, the only time Wolfe looked back was to make sure a model was properly fitted in one of his designs. He graduated with a degree in fashion merchandising and design in May and credits faculty in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences with shaping his passion, immersing him in clothing and textiles disciplines, and for a purposeful education that included the economics of retail markets as well as runways.

“I give a huge, huge thank you to Dr. (Elizabeth) Newcomb-Hopfer. She has really been my backbone,” Wolfe says of his advisor. “Her working with me has helped me to perfect my craft. I’ve learned amazing sewing techniques. I’ve become more creative. I’ve learned to step outside my comfort zone.”

His designs opened a formal-wear fashion show at Fayetteville’s Crown Coliseum in January, produced by the bridal boutique An Affair to Remember, Wolfe says. And when it came to outfitting A&T’s next top model and top administrator for the annual Earth Day Fashion Show in April, Wolfe was picked to custom design for Chancellor Harold L. Martin Sr. He constructed a vest for Martin’s ease of movement, considering that the chancellor wasn’t used to modeling and that the garment was made of plastic and laminating paper.

“I was nervous for a second,” Wolfe says, “but then I know the talent that I have and people within our department have this confidence in me, so then I said, ‘I’m going to crush it.’”

Wolfe’s post-graduation plan was to continue working retail as he culls internship offers. Ultimately, Wolfe wants to own “my own brand name, my own bricks-and-mortar store.”

Newcomb-Hopfer receives Junior Faculty Excellence Award

“Tireless ... enthusiastic ... an inspiration and a role model to students ... possessing a drive for excellence...” Those are only a few of the descriptors students and colleagues used in enthusiastically endorsing Dr. Elizabeth Newcomb-Hopfer’s qualifications for the SAES’s Junior Faculty Teaching Excellence Award for 2014–15.

“Students can feel the energy and optimism radiate from her teaching,” wrote one student.

“As a future entrepreneur, I have gained crucial hands-on experience in how to successfully run an apparel company,” wrote another.

Newcomb-Hopfer, assistant professor of fashion merchandising and design in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, joined the faculty in 2010. Colleagues say that she has continued to grow and excel as an instructor and mentor, and often cite her friendly, approachable teaching style.

Newcomb-Hopfer sees her role as preparing students to stand out in a demanding industry that she describes as “brutally competitive.”

“To help them stand out, I must arm them with industry-specific knowledge and creative and technical skills, as well as instill in them a true excitement about fashion,” she says. Early on, Newcomb-Hopfer spotted an opportunity to do so, and thus developed a much-needed course, Apparel Construction and Evaluation II, which she now teaches. She also teaches seven other courses in the fashion curriculum. A large majority of her student evaluations rank her in the “superior” range.

In addition to teaching, Hopfer maintains a heavy advising load, serves as advisor to the student organization Fashion Xcetera, and serves on numerous committees at the department, school and university level, several of which she has chaired. She is also active in community outreach, as leader of a USDA-funded project, “Addressing Nutrition and Well-Being of Teen Mothers Through a Mentoring Program.”

“I love to learn; and I want to pass this love of learning to my students,” says Newcomb-Hopfer.



Dr. Elizabeth Newcomb-Hopfer (left) and one of her fashion merchandising and design students, Ayleena Daniels.

Dr. Radiah Minor of the Department of Animal Sciences was part of an interdisciplinary team of A&T faculty honored with the University’s Community Engagement Award for 2014–15. Minor and three members of the School of Engineering faculty have applied grants from two sources to a “Girls in Science” program that is coordinating summer camps and other STEM activities for students in grades K–9.

The chair of the SAES’s Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Design, **Dr. Abolghasem Shahbazi**, was adviser for the doctoral dissertation honored as A&T’s best for the 2014–15 academic year. Dr. Jeremy Ferrell’s dissertation, guided by Shahbazi, was “A distributed model of oilseed biorefining, via integrated industrial ecology exchanges, Analysis of Economic Modeling, Process Simulation, and Life Cycle Assessment at the North Carolina EcoComplex.” Ferrell’s research compared costs for different methods of oilseed and biodiesel production with a focus on new metrics for small-scale production.

Dr. Jianmei Yu, an SAES research scientist, received an Intellectual Property Award from A&T that recognized her contributions to an allergen-reducing process for peanuts that was licensed to a Canadian firm, Xemerge — a development that the news service Reuters heralded as hope that “help could soon be on the way for the roughly 2.8 million Americans with a potentially life-threatening allergy.” As exclusive licensee of the patented hypoallergenic process, Alrgn Bio, is now open for business in Gateway University Research Park, becoming the third-ever spinoff company to market intellectual property developed at A&T.

James Williams, an SAES computer network specialist and the head coach of the North Carolina A&T women’s bowling team, was named MEAC Coach of the year in mid-March. The recognition came as he led the Aggie keggers to the highest ranking in program history — 10th in one national poll — only a few weeks before the team won the XBowling Intercollegiate Team Championship in a competition in Wichita, Kan., April 16–18.

Dr. Sung-Jin Lee of the SAES’s Department of Family and Consumer Sciences received the North Carolina Association of Family and Consumer Sciences’ 2015 New Achievers Award. As an assistant professor of housing research, Lee has received more than \$500,000 in funding from USDA for research into assessments of lending patterns in rural North Carolina, as well as “aging-in-place” strategies that older homeowners in the state are using to remain in their homes and other issues involving housing and homeownership.

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More than 270 participants turned out on campus for the 1890
system-wide Wellness Walk/Run celebrating the Second Morrill
Act of 1890, that created land-grant institutions such as N.C. A&T.

Mark Your Calendars
**INSTITUTE FOR FUTURE
AGRICULTURAL LEADERS (IFAL):**
June 21 – 26

**RESEARCH APPRENTICESHIP
PROGRAM (RAP)**
for high school students:
June 21 – July 17

1890s ON THE HILL
and Convocation in the Library
of Congress in Washington:
July 15 – 16

NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER
to commemorate signing of
Second Morrill Act in 1890:
Aug. 30

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