

# The MORROW

Vol. III, No. 1 | MAY 2024

Where tomorrow meets today through ALEC

Transfer students  
grow the family  
p. 11

A glimpse of  
food and  
farming  
p. 18



**SWEET HOME  
ILLINOIS!**

How these students found their home in ALEC p. 8

A family  
legacy: Hail  
to the  
orange,  
blue and  
agriculture,  
too p. 31



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Consumer &  
Environmental Sciences  
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# Finding a home away from home

You're 18 years old, fresh out of high school, and about to embark on what is supposed to be the best four years of your life: college.

Suddenly, you're thrust into an unfamiliar environment. You're with so many new people and taking these classes that supposedly prepare you to enter the workforce in four years. And all the while, you're missing the place and people that have shaped you back home.

Your first semester of college can be a difficult transition as you learn to navigate your new environment. But finding a new community can help an unfamiliar place feel like home. However, that's easier said than done though, right?

Trust me, I've been there. Coming from a small town of 3,000 people that sends very few students to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, I knew almost no one upon arriving on campus. There are over 35,000 undergraduate students on campus. So how was I supposed to find "my people"?

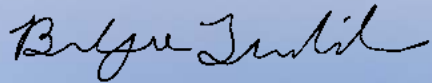
The Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications (ALEC) program gave me the community that I needed during my freshman year. Through getting involved in registered student organizations and getting to know the people in my classes, I was able to meet friends who shared my passions for agriculture, leadership, education and communications.

And as I wrap up my sophomore year at Illinois, it's the community I've found in ALEC that continues to drive me forward. Here, faculty and peers care about your interests. They want to see you succeed in anything you choose to pursue and are willing to do whatever they can to help make your dreams a reality.

This year's edition of *The Morrow* reflects that community. People from different places, backgrounds and walks of life come together on campus, united by our shared passions, with the drive it takes to shape and become the future leaders, educators and communicators of the agri-food industry. I couldn't be more grateful to be a part of that community and have the opportunity to learn from such talented individuals.

We've all heard the saying, "It's the people that make the place." And in ALEC, that couldn't be more true.

So, whether you are an ALEC alum who graduated years ago or a prospective student who has yet to set foot on campus, welcome home.



Brooklyne Luessenheide  
Editor-in-Chief

<https://alec.illinois.edu/>

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**ON THE COVER**

Taylor Talbert (Agricultural Communications), Jose Pichardo Ramirez (Agricultural Education) and Lucy Moss (Organizational and Community Leadership). Photo by Anna Longworth at Foellinger Auditorium at Illinois, March 2023.

# Inside *The Morrow*

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Illinois alum Dean Germán Bollero feels right at home on campus.

# Finding home has special significance

Dear friends of *The Morrow*,

I am delighted to welcome you to the latest edition of *The Morrow*. As the dean of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES), it is a true honor to introduce a publication that showcases our remarkable community of students, faculty, staff, alumni and supporters.

The theme of “finding home” holds special significance for me, as my journey at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has been the longest and most rewarding chapter in my life. Over 30 years ago, I arrived as a graduate student and discovered an academic home where I felt valued and supported — much like the inspiring students and faculty featured in this publication.

Like so many others in Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, we have discovered the importance of effective communications, education, and leadership within these hallowed halls. We hope you, too, will find your home in ACES (if you haven’t already!) and uncover the transformative power of these tools to propel our industry forward.

Every day, I am grateful for the unwavering dedication and diverse contributions of each member of our community who collectively shape our academic institution into a genuine and welcoming home.

Whether you are a prospective student or an alum, we can’t wait to welcome you home to ACES!

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Germán Bollero  
Professor, Dean, and Robert A. Easter Chair  
College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

As a land grant institution, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has a responsibility to acknowledge the historical context in which it exists. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign was established on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Piankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe and Chickasaw Nations. We acknowledge these Native Nations and the importance of working with them as we move forward as an institution. Over the next 150 years, we will be a vibrant community inclusive of all our differences, with Native peoples at the core of our efforts.

*From the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion*

# The Morrow: A nod to our heritage

*The Morrow*, first published in Spring 2022, is produced by students in AGCM 380 to provide real-world experience in agricultural journalism and communications. The magazine is named after the Morrow Plots, the oldest agricultural research plots in North America and a highlight on any campus tour. The inaugural *Morrow* team considered nearly 150 name options for the magazine. In the end, *The Morrow*, submitted by Sarah Richey, was the clear winner. Merriam-Webster defines *morrow* as “the future,” just like the agricultural leadership, education and communications (ALEC) students and alumni featured in each edition.

And please note: For brevity, in *The Morrow*, you will see the acronym ALEC is used extensively, along with ACES — College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.



## By students, for students

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# Sweet home Illinois



From left: Lucy Moss, Jose Pichardo  
and Taylor Talbert  
*Photo courtesy of Anna Longworth*



# No matter your background, interests or where you are from, there's a place for everyone in the ALEC program. Here's how these three students found a new community and a home away from home at Illinois and in the ALEC program.

By Jersey Hesse, Katie Landers and Brooklyne Luessenheide

## Lucy Moss

College is a time of transformative change and the chance to make friends that will last a lifetime. But how do you navigate this huge step? Lucy Moss, a sophomore in Organizational and Community Leadership (OCL) says the answer might be right in front of you.

Moss grew up in the Champaign-Urbana area and has been around the university her entire life. Both of her parents work at the university. And while this was beneficial for opportunities throughout her high school career, it was also a reason she was looking at different post-secondary schools. "UIUC is such an excellent school," Moss says, "and I think I overlooked it."

One factor that drove her decision to attend the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign was the ALEC program. Moss says she's always been a driven individual and that she wanted to work with people. Once she found the OCL concentration, she knew where she belonged.

"When I read the description and looked at the coursework, I just saw myself reflected in that program," Moss says.

She's loved her time here, but it hasn't been free of challenges. For example, she doesn't have an agricultural background, which was a bit intimidating. This feeling took a backseat to the camaraderie she has experienced. "I stayed because of the people," she says. "Everyone in my classes was so lovely."

## Jose Pichardo

The ALEC program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has become a second home for Jose Pichardo, a junior in the education concentration, from Harvard, Illinois. He appreciates the welcoming community, alignment of beliefs and enthusiastic engagement of his cohort members.

Pichardo has developed a profound affection for the ALEC program since transferring to Illinois from McHenry County College in the fall of 2023. As he embarked on his journey, he knew it was inevitable that he would step outside his comfort zone and need to confront challenges independently.

He was ripe for the challenge. Harvard is about as far north in the state as you can get from Champaign-Urbana. And although it's considered a small town, with just 9,000 people, it's much closer to bustling Chicago than the hometowns of many of Pichardo's classmates.

He says agricultural education wasn't always his intended career path until he started taking agriculture classes during high school.

"It provided something to me that other subjects in school didn't," Pichardo says.

At Illinois, he found the collaborative and mindful individuals who make up the agricultural education program. He developed a tight bond with his cohort and instructors. And he's learned to understand that his background makes him stronger when he challenges himself to change the narrative and follow his aspirations.

"I've built an amazing support system with many of my educators, peers, friends and organizations," he says. "They are truly what's kept me going here."

## Taylor Talbert

It's the people you surround yourself with who can make all the difference at a big university like Illinois. Taylor Talbert, a junior in agricultural communications, can attest to that.

Talbert came to the university from Onarga, Illinois, a rural town located about an hour north of Champaign-Urbana. Her parents are alumni, but she says that she never felt pressured by either of them to attend Illinois. Rather, she was drawn here by the multidisciplinary ALEC program.

"I knew I wanted to come here, but I wasn't sure what concentration I wanted to choose," she says. "ALEC offered me the opportunity to switch between concentrations if I wanted to, but it also wrapped them together."

Talbert took every opportunity to get involved and meet new people. Motivated to spend less time in her dorm room and more time in the student community, she got involved in many registered student organizations (RSOs) from the start. A practice that she's kept up — in fact, she's involved in seven different ACES RSOs, including all three ALEC RSOs (see pg. 11).

Finding a new home and community on a big campus can be difficult. It can take time and patience to find people you truly connect with.

"When you start college, you think that the first people you find are going to be your best friends for the next four years, but that isn't always the case," she says. "You might meet your best friends a year or two into college."

Talbert is an exceptionally gifted designer, as well. She's designed several of the more colorful spreads in the last two editions of *The Morrow* and served as the social media manager for the 2023 edition. Being a part of *The Morrow* has been one of her favorite experiences during her time in ALEC.

"I have enjoyed being able to talk to people, highlight stories and connect with individuals across all three concentrations," Talbert says.





Four members of this year's Publication Development and Production class are transfer students: from left, Rachel Ash, Sarah Story, Easton Rosen and Jordi Oliver. Photo courtesy of Anna Longworth

## Paving your path: Parkland Pathway

By Rachel Ash

When I was a senior in high school, I had no idea where I was going to go to school or what exactly I wanted to study. I considered several matters before deciding to apply, such as program availability, personal goals and cost.

I was stuck at a crossroads. And, after some reflection, it didn't look like a four-year university was going to be an option for me.

Then I learned about the Parkland Pathway program, a dual-enrollment offering between Parkland College and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. For me, it was the best of both worlds: you are a full-time student at Parkland for the first two years of college, but you are also a part-time student at Illinois.

Participants can take up to five credit hours a semester at Illinois — at the Parkland tuition rate — while having access to Illinois clubs, extracurriculars, and even University Housing.

The best part is that you are guaranteed admission to Illinois after you complete the program.

Participating in this program turned out to be the best decision I could have made for my education..and finances!

## Transfer students grow the family

By Jordi Oliver

Beginning a new journey as a transfer student — that is, as a student who started at a different college, then came to Illinois — can be intimidating. I know that from firsthand experience. I transferred here from Lake Land College in Fall 2023, one of about 1,350 transfer students who arrive on the main campus every year.

To be honest, for me, the transition took a bit of time. Originally, I felt lost. Illinois is a big campus and pretty much everything was new.

But despite challenges, such as adjusting to a different academic curriculum and building new social networks, I feel like I've been encouraged to embrace the journey and get involved on campus and in my program of study. The transition has been welcoming, and I've become part of a supportive new community.

I've grown to realize that starting new is not a bad thing. It's a chance to grow, to embrace the little things, and to discover who you want to be. You can develop new hobbies, find new interests, and be excited for a world of new adventures and opportunities.

For example, I have reconnected with my passion for art, for playing guitar and for spending time in nature.

I've even tried some new activities such as crocheting, video production and, my new love, reading books.

Help is plentiful. Transfer students find an environment here that's ready to help them navigate the challenges of adjusting to a new academic and social landscape.

For example, the Illini Transfer Ambassador program offers mentorship, orientation programs, social events and outreach initiatives. I found this program helps create a sense of belonging and community among transfer students, helps them connect with peers and immerses themselves in campus life.

Another service is the Leading Illinois Transfers program, in which transfer students are paired with mentors who offer support and encouragement, as well as a variety of leadership workshops are offered throughout the year.

And finally, New Student and Family Experiences provides guidance on academic planning, campus resources and ways to get involved.

I believe that by embracing opportunities and facing challenges head-on, transfer students can make the most of their experience. As a transfer student community, we can embrace our journey and be proud members of the Illini family.

# Start here to navigate student financial aid

By Sarah Story

*Editor's note: Resources such as the Office of Student Financial Aid (OSFA) help guide students with questions about the financial aspects of their Illinois experience.*

- Q.** I am an in-state student and want to attend Illinois, but I'm not sure I can afford it. I plan to work to cover the cost of everyday living, but I don't want to be in debt. What are my options?
- A.** *One of the most popular, accessible options is the Illinois Commitment Program. It covers all tuition costs for Illinois students who cannot afford tuition, if they meet specific guidelines, such as a family income of \$67,100 and under.*
- Q.** What is FAFSA, and how can I utilize it?
- A.** *FAFSA is an acronym for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It automatically enrolls you for federally funded scholarship opportunities.*
- Q.** What ACES scholarships are available to me and how can I apply?
- A.** *Within ACES, \$3.8 million in merit-based scholarships are awarded each year. First-year students are automatically evaluated for scholarships based on their application for admission; all other ACES students are eligible to apply via one application per year.*
- Q.** How can I get financial help for study abroad programs?
- A.** *Study abroad scholarships are available for all destinations. Some limits apply. Find further information on the ACES website.*
- Q.** I can't afford to pay my tuition all at once, even with scholarships. Are there other options?
- A.** *Illinois offers a payment plan that allows you to spread out your tuition costs over a certain period. This applies to tuition, mandatory fees and room and board. The payment plan is managed by the University Bursar.*

Check here: [paymybill.illinois.edu](https://paymybill.illinois.edu)

## The 5 Ws about OSFA

By Sarah Story

### 1. Who

can help me with student finance questions?

*Office of Student Financial Aid (OSFA)*

### 2. What

can you find there?

*Find information about grants, scholarships, waivers, loans, employment and more.*

### 3. When

should I use this office?

*Anytime you have student-related financial questions.*

### 4. Where

is the actual office?

*620 E. John St., Champaign. Call (217) 333-0100 or go to [osfa.illinois.edu](https://osfa.illinois.edu).*

### 5. Why

is this important to me as a future or current student?

*In making college decisions, finances are a key consideration.*

# THE JONATHAN BALDWIN TURNER SCHOLAR PROGRAM

## Prestigious scholarships cultivate leaders

Jonathan Baldwin Turner (1805-1899) was integral in establishing land grant universities, as well as founding the Illinois Industrial University, which is now the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The Jonathan Baldwin Turner (JBT) Scholar Program in his name provides financial support and professional development experiences to create leaders in the field of agricultural, consumer, and environmental sciences. The program has longstanding support from alumni and private donors who believe in students and want to help them excel. These are three of the scholarship recipients.

### Kyle Eathington



My first-year experience as a participant in the Jonathan Baldwin Turner (JBT) program has been nothing short of transformative. From engaging

in class discussions about leadership to delving deeper into the rich history and meaning behind the JBT program, I've been immersed in a community that truly values leadership, education and communications within the agricultural industry.

My journey in the Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications (ALEC) program and as a JBT scholar has been deeply influenced by my upbringing, showing livestock since the age of eight. Through this hands-on experience, I developed a profound understanding of agricultural practices and cultivated a passion for sustainable farming. Now, as an ALEC student, I am equipped with the knowledge and skills to further contribute to the agricultural community.

When I graduate, I will eagerly apply what I've learned here to my family's farm. Returning home to the farm is not just a personal goal but a commitment to utilize my education to make a meaningful impact in my community.

With the support of the JBT Scholar Program and the ALEC program, I am confident in my ability to lead and innovate in the agri-food industry, shaping a more sustainable and resilient future for generations to come.

*Kyle Eathington is a sophomore in organizational and community leadership from Avon, IL.*

### Carmen Trotta



As a second-year Jonathan Baldwin Turner (JBT) scholar, I have been offered numerous opportunities to grow as a leader both personally and

professionally. The second year of the program focuses mostly on how we use our leadership to work with others.

I had the chance to enroll in the JBT Needs Assessment course, which helped me understand how I can use my leadership capabilities to help offer potential solutions for gaps within a specific company. In this class, I was able to work with three other JBT scholars and the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service to look at how newly hired employees' agricultural knowledge and training affect their roles.

On top of this course, I have also attended a career fair mixer event; donor meet-and-greet luncheon; Research Park tour event; and much more. These opportunities have allowed me to connect with various students, alumni and stakeholders of the program to learn more about how it has benefitted them and how they want to invest in my future and that of many others.

The JBT Scholar Program has shown me more ways to be a leader within the ALEC community and everywhere I go!

*Carmen Trotta is a junior in agricultural education from Chicago, IL.*

### Olivia Charles



I'm always happy to share the Jonathan Baldwin Turner (JBT) scholar experience. I have made friendships with fellow scholars and connections

with university leadership figures. I have also learned how to handle real-world situations through applied experiences.

I interviewed for JBT during my freshman year because I was looking for ways to continue paying for my education. Now, as a senior, I realize that JBT has helped pay for my education, and much more.

Each year, a special JBT section of a class is offered to help a cohort of students from different majors make friendships and grow together. These classes are also taught by prominent university leaders. I have been so lucky to create personal relationships with these students, university officials and even industry professionals.

Specifically, in our JBT section last fall taught by instructor Jean Drasgow, we worked in groups to connect with industry professionals and solve real-world problems. My team worked with USDA NRCS to help create better training protocols for new hires. I noted this in job interviews, and it definitely gave me real-world experience to show that I had specific opportunities to excel through this scholars program.

These experiences have been valuable this year, as I used them as examples of my skillset for job interviews.

*Olivia Charles is a senior in agricultural communications from Mount Carroll, IL.*

# Campus Jobs Spotlight

Compiled by Jersey Hesse



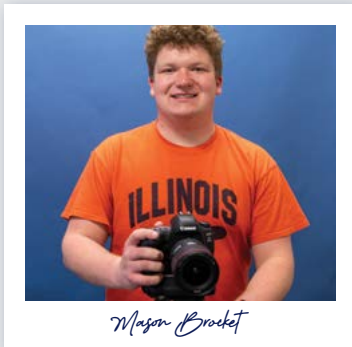
## Morgan Mouser

Located in Office of the Dean, Morgan Mouser spends her time performing various duties as a student intern — answering phone calls and emails, preparing items for meetings and working closely with others. Her favorite part of the job is the community aspect. “I feel cared for and appreciated as a student and member of the team,” Mouser says.



## Carter Puracchio

In the Campus Recreation Center East, Carter Puracchio is employed as a facility assistant. He works in various roles that include checking guests in and out, cleaning machines and equipment, assisting patrons and lending a hand to other members of the staff. He likes interacting with guests and his hardworking coworkers.



## Mason Brockett

In the Integrated Bioprocessing Research Laboratory, Mason Brockett serves as the business office intern. His tasks include updating the lab’s website, capturing photos of machinery and workers and ensuring that the short courses are ready. His recent task included onboarding new interns.



## Ava SplEAR

In the College of ACES Office of Marketing Communications, Ava SplEAR is involved in marketing on social media, writing stories and blog posts, filming videos, taking photos and conducting interviews. Her overall role is to create content that will help attract prospective students and increase enrollment in the College of ACES.

## Get involved in a registered student organization

By Rachel Ash

The College of ACES has more than 40 registered student organizations (RSOs). You can explore careers, network and form connections with others who have similar interests. RSOs that appeal specifically to ALEC students specialize in leadership, education and communications, but they’re open to everyone.

### Leadership: Illini Emerging Leaders

Illini Emerging Leaders is a professional organization that believes everyone has the ability to become a leader. This RSO works to serve the ACES community while fostering leadership skills.

### Education: Agricultural Education Club/Alpha Tau Alpha

Agricultural Education Club/Alpha Tau Alpha promotes agricultural education through scholarship and fellowship.

Members actively help organize and assist with State FFA career development events and the statewide Greenhand Leadership Conference, as well as participate in professional development trips.

### Communications: Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow

The Illini Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow helps participants explore career opportunities, network with industry professionals and enhance their professionalism. Club members can submit material from class work and elsewhere to a national critique contest.



This QSR code will take you to ACES RSOs.  
[go.aces.illinois.edu/ACES-RSO](https://go.aces.illinois.edu/ACES-RSO)

# Meet the ALEC Instructors

Here are the instructors you'll meet in your leadership, education and communications classes. Learn about their backgrounds, mission statements, teaching statements and research interests at [alec.illinois.edu/about/what-we-do-why-it-matters](http://alec.illinois.edu/about/what-we-do-why-it-matters)



**Dr. Eric Morgan**

(he/him)

**Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies**

**Hometown:** Las Cruces, New Mexico

**Fun Fact:** I sang with a group on the soundtrack to the movie "Cold Mountain," which led us to perform at the Oscars with Allison Kraus and Elvis Costello. That was 20 years ago.



**Dr. Pam Axtman-Barker**

(she/her)

**Instructor and Communications Academic Advisor**

**Hometown:** Meridian, Idaho

**Fun Fact:** I never buy bread from the store, I always bake my own. From sandwich loaves to artisan sourdough to fresh focaccia, nothing beats the smell and taste of freshly baked bread.



**Mr. Gary Ochs**

(he/him)

**Instructor, Recruiter and Education Academic Advisor**

**Hometown:** Olney, Illinois

**Fun Fact:** The farm I grew up on has been in my family since 1871.



**Dr. Jasmine Collins**

(she/her)

**Assistant Professor**

**Hometown:** Colorado Springs, Colorado

**Fun Fact:** My family and I are quite competitive when it comes to board and card games.



**Dr. Owen Roberts**

(he/him)

**Instructor and Director, Agricultural Communications**

**Hometown:** Guelph, Ontario, Canada

**Fun Fact:** I got through school by playing bass on weekends in a country band. I still play in a rock band called The GMOs.



**Dr. Colby Gregg**

(they/them)

**Visiting Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education and Community Leadership**

**Hometown:** Paoli, Oklahoma

**Fun Fact:** This summer, I plan to collect all seven species of Periodical Cicada in Illinois.



**Dr. Dave Rosch**

(he/him)

**Associate Professor**

**Hometown:** Albany, New York

**Fun Fact:** I've been in two car dealership TV commercials.



**Dr. Amy Leman**

(she/her)

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**Fun Fact:** I like to run, and I teach group fitness classes at my YMCA.



**Dr. Jenn Smist**

(she/her)

**Teaching Assistant Professor and Leadership Academic Advisor**

**Hometown:** Agawam, Massachusetts

**Fun Fact:** My first job was at an amusement park.

# Spare no effort for your own well-being

By Jordi Oliver

Your professors will tell you it's important to attend class, interact with them and with your classmates, and develop a positive classroom culture.

But when class ends, then what? Where do you go or what do you do for a complete campus experience?

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has thought this through. The university provides extensive services that range from academic support to recreational activities, to enhance students' overall well-being and educational success.

- **The Illinois Counseling Center** offers services addressing emotional, interpersonal and academic concerns, including group sessions tailored to students' needs. The College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences even has its own embedded counselor, Mark Layng, for professional consultation. Check out his advice for students: [go.aces.illinois.edu/LayngAdvice](https://go.aces.illinois.edu/LayngAdvice).
- **The McKinley Health Center** offers a wellness app that provides an interactive platform for students to monitor their well-being. It offers valuable tips about stress management and study habits and even features a "dial a nurse"



program, ensuring immediate assistance for students in need.

- For students with documented disabilities, the **Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services** offers support services to ensure equal access to educational opportunities.
- To help Illinois students succeed in the workplace, the **Career Center** and **Illinois Leadership Center** provide career coaching, resume reviews and leadership workshops.

The **Activities and Recreation Center** (alongside the **Campus Recreation Center East**) promotes physical well-being, offering workout areas, swimming pools, basketball courts and indoor rock-climbing walls.

- After a workout — or anytime at all, really — students can head to the **Illini Union** to unwind. Events

include music performances, trivia, karaoke, movie nights and more. Students can also spend their evenings in the Illini Union recreation room, challenging others to games of pool and bowling.

- Safety is the top priority on campus. Services like **Safe Walks** and **Safe Rides** ensure secure travel around campus. The **Illini-Alert system** allows all students to stay connected and get updates on monitored events around campus. As well, emergency blue light callboxes can be found throughout campus, ensuring that all students are close to help at any time.

All these features mean that Illinois remains committed to fostering supportive and enriching experiences for students. For more information, visit the "Resources for Students" page at [illinois.edu/students](https://illinois.edu/students).



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ΣΑ



# Homegrown Insights from ALEC Alumni



## Rob Klein

Ph.D. student in developmental psychology at Cornell University

### 1. How has your degree shaped your career path?

Getting both my bachelor's and master's degrees through the ALEC program helped prepare me for my Ph.D. program. The faculty members (especially Dr. Rosch) were super supportive and always willing to chat or offer guidance. I also became a strong public speaker and writer; skills I use all the time.

### 2. What was your favorite experience in ALEC?

I really loved being a teaching assistant for LEAD 260, the introductory leadership course. I worked with highly motivated students and facilitated engaging and meaningful activities. I really enjoyed watching my students grow through the semester, and I still keep in touch with some of them!

### 3. Why were the ALEC program and the College of ACES home to you?

What encouraged me to switch my major to ALEC and to come back for my master's was the faculty that I studied and worked with. The ALEC program and the College of ACES felt unique; faculty were genuinely interested in getting to know you and helping you grow.



## Oakley Whalen

Human Resources Business Partner and Corporate Facilitator with CGB Enterprises

### 1. How has your degree shaped your career path?

My degree provided me with essential skills in communication, team dynamics and decision-making, which have proven invaluable in my role. It also helped me fine-tune my soft skills, which are crucial in HR for building relationships, resolving conflicts and understanding diverse perspectives, ultimately enhancing my effectiveness in developing and supporting teams.

### 2. What was your favorite experience in ALEC?

My favorite ALEC experiences were in all of Kari Keating and Debra Korte's classes. Both professors designed courses that pushed me out of my comfort zone, ultimately preparing me for the real world and inspiring me to continually seek growth and development in my career.

### 3. Why were the ALEC program and the College of ACES home to you?

ALEC and ACES felt like home to me because of the people. The faculty and staff consistently went above and beyond to support and guide me, setting me up for success. I am incredibly grateful for the love and support they provided, which continues to this day.



## Sean Welch

Associate Director of Student Recognition, Illinois FFA Center

### 1. How has your degree shaped your career path?

The organizational skills, as well as industry knowledge, I learned in the ALEC program has helped me tremendously as I work to coordinate State FFA Contests and SAE (Supervised Agricultural Experience) opportunities for over 41,000 FFA members in Illinois.

### 2. What was your favorite experience in ALEC?

My favorite experience in ALEC was the class trip we took to South Carolina with our student teaching cohort in 2022. We learned about agriculture education in both South Carolina and Georgia, and we made plenty of memories along the way.

### 3. Why were the ALEC program and the College of ACES home to you?

Building strong relationships with both instructors as well as fellow students throughout the college has been incredibly helpful to me, both during my time in the classroom and in my current position.





### Ava Oros

Marketing Representative,  
John Deere

#### 1. How has your degree shaped your career path?

My ALEC degree was a perfect mix of classroom and real-life experience. As a hands-on learner, it was critical for me to experience different types of careers within the agricultural industry. Through class projects and guest lectures, that's exactly what I achieved through the ALEC program.

#### 2. What was your favorite experience in ALEC?

I was given the opportunity to be one of the first interns for the ALEC program. Being able to help behind the scenes with social media content, the development of the program, and the internship itself are top favorites of mine.

#### 3. Why were the ALEC program and the College of ACES home to you?

I wanted to be part of a community, not just a college. The ALEC program and the College of ACES intertwine their classes, organizations, professors, resources and so much more to help guide students to a successful career. We collectively work towards the same goal, which is why Illinois will always be home.



### Abigail Kepp

Communications Coordinator,  
University of Illinois Division of  
Public Safety

#### 1. How has your degree shaped your career path?

As the communications coordinator for the Division of Public Safety, one of my responsibilities is creating engaging and informative social media content. My ALEC degree provided me with a foundation in leadership, education and communications that supports my tasks at work.

#### 2. What was your favorite experience in ALEC?

My favorite experience in ALEC was networking with agricultural journalists from across the world in International Agricultural Communications. This course not only gave me insight into global agricultural journalism, but I also gained knowledge that can be applied in various communications positions.

#### 3. Why were the ALEC program and the College of ACES home to you?

The ALEC program and the College of ACES were my home throughout college because of the relationships I created with classmates and professors. I keep in touch with friends I made in the ALEC program and could reach out to any of my professors if I needed career advice.



### Kylie Miller

Agriculture Teacher and FFA  
Advisor at Prairie Central  
High School

#### 1. How has your degree shaped your career path?

My degree led me to my career path, as it gave me the skill sets needed to combine my passion for agriculture and education into one. My degree in Agricultural Education has allowed me to enter back into the classroom to teach and inspire the next generation of agriculturists.

#### 2. What was your favorite experience in ALEC?

My favorite ALEC experience was the camaraderie among my classmates. My peers all had gifts and talents that they brought to class each day. We spent a lot of time together both inside and outside of the classroom, and because of our experiences in the ALEC program, we were able to share our talents with each other to ensure we were helping each other succeed.

#### 3. Why were the ALEC program and the College of ACES home to you?

The ALEC program felt like home to me because of the program's ability to bring groups of students together. I entered the program as a junior transfer student. With the opportunities offered through the program, I was able to get involved right away and connect with other students and staff with the same interests and passions as myself.

# A glimpse of agriculture

Here are some of the class's favorite photos from the photo assignment "How I relate to agriculture" from the Communicating Agriculture class (AGCM 220).



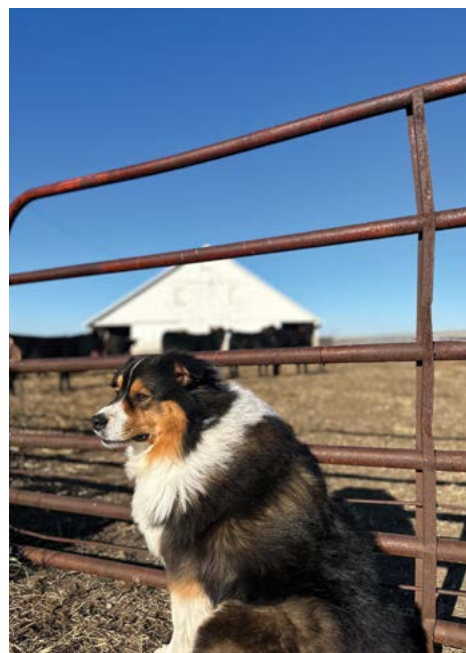
Photographer: Parker Taylor | Windmill construction attracted workers to our region and brought resources to our high school for much needed improvements.



Photographer: Andrea Buhrow | Millie, a 10-year-old cow on the Buhrow farm, sports Illini-colored ear tags.



Photographer: Ty Bickelhaupt | Ty Bickelhaupt and his dad used an auger to clean out a wet bin and get it ready for next year's harvest.



Photographer: Emily Brooks | The most loyal farm employee, Archie, waits for cattle chores to begin.



**Photographer: Ashlyn Murdock** | *Our family nourishes our kids with hay to encourage growth.*



**Photographer: Lacey Cotter** | *Our farm in Fisher, IL, births about 20 lambs a year, like this one.*



**Photographer: Wynne Chen** | *Nature offered a beautiful view behind our chicken farm as the sun set.*

# Study abroad profoundly affected me

By Emily Brooks

My study abroad journey has been defined by three pivotal programs: Panama, South Africa and Italy. Each time I stepped off a plane in a different country, I was excited to embark on a new journey.

In Panama, I grew to respect the differences throughout the global agricultural industry. Being from Illinois, I am used to corn, soybean and wheat fields, as well as cattle and swine. From a pineapple plantation to a sustainable farm, I saw a side of agriculture that I had never seen before.

In South Africa, my service-learning experience at Bathande — which is a local neighborhood's literacy education program in Khayelitsha — I saw firsthand a community pulsating with resilience and hope. My mindset on education was impacted greatly. The kids were all so eager to learn, yet the resources provided to them were minimal. It was like a slap in the face when I realized I had taken my own education for granted.

In Rome, I was immersed in a country with deep historical roots, owing to its unique culture. Every corner of the city is connected back to the ancient leaders who shaped the course of history with their vision for Rome. I walked cobblestone alleys, savored culinary delights, took in the beautiful architecture and learned more about its rich history.

The decision to study abroad is a leap of faith, but one that has transformed me into a better, more aware person.



Study abroad trip to Rome. Photo courtesy of Elena Cleary



Elena Cleary with school children in Sierra Leone. Photo courtesy of Elena Cleary

## Sierra Leonean women break the cycle of shame

By Elena Cleary

Sierra Leone — nicknamed Salone by many who live there — is one of the poorest countries in the world. But it's rich in other ways ... with love, strong faith and hope for the future. I spent my spring break in Freetown, the city where freed slaves returned to Africa.

With five Illinois College of Media journalism students and two professors, we shot b-roll, conducted interviews and collected audio to create a documentary on mitigating period poverty.

Families in Salone constantly face impossible decisions. Financial constraints force households to choose between putting food on the table and purchasing period products.

With the culture of menstrual shame in the country, women are not supposed to speak about their cycle. It is seen as taboo and solely a female issue. Throughout the week, we spoke with sexual and reproductive health educators and advocates. These empowering women are spreading the message that periods are not something to be ashamed of but celebrated. There would be no human population without menstrual cycles.

Our team followed Uman Tok, an organization providing reproductive health awareness, education and sustainable feminine health kits to women and girls. We also spoke with educators at the Education For All school, a nurse midwife who worked during the country's civil war, and young Sierra Leonean women who have just reached puberty. It is my privilege to be able to share the stories of the most amazing, resilient and kind-hearted women I have ever met.

The documentary was made in partnership with journalism students at Fourah Bay College at the University of Sierra Leone. Working with students from Freetown, who are my age and also studying journalism, was an experience like no other. The close relationships, formed only after a week, make me long to return to Salone as soon as possible.

Until then, our team of Illinois journalism students will do all we can to advocate for our peers in Africa.

*The Sierra Leone study abroad team presented a trailer of the documentary on April 25, 2024, at the Undergraduate Research Symposium at the Illini Union. The documentary will air on May 28, 2024, Menstrual Hygiene Day.*

# Stepping up to the challenge

## Ireland's Claire Mc Cormack is our first Visiting Global Agricultural Journalist

By Sarah Story

Claire Mc Cormack's visit to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign last fall provided many firsts for the Irish media scholar and agricultural journalist: speaking in classes dedicated to agricultural journalism and communications; meeting iconic academics who have defined the field; harvesting corn near Philo on a massive combine; and attending her first U.S. college football game.

All this, thanks to another first: Mc Cormack was the inaugural Illinois Visiting Global Agricultural Journalist. This two-week appointment gives top-tier agricultural journalists from abroad, like Mc Cormack, access to campus resources (such as the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center) and activities like the agricultural communications homecoming huddle. At the same time, it offers students an opportunity to exchange views on agricultural journalism and communications globally with one of the best in the business.

"There is huge potential to learn from, and collaborate with, each other to identify and close knowledge gaps and to ensure the agricultural and food beat maintains its place in global newsrooms," Mc Cormack says. "It's an exciting, challenging, educational and stimulating time to be an agricultural communicator and journalist. I believe this is a growth area, and the ALEC students are ahead of the curve."

Originally from County Westmeath in the middle of Ireland, where her family ran an agricultural contracting business, Mc Cormack has spent years learning how to bring passion and heart to the table of her audiences. In secondary school, she developed an enthusiasm for writing,



Claire Mc Cormack enthusiastically joined Matt Rice on this harvester at the Rice family farm near Philo, Illinois. Photo courtesy of Owen Roberts

leading her to Maynooth University to complete her undergraduate degree in English and sociology.

Mc Cormack then went on to complete three different master's degrees in journalism, literature of the Americas, and sustainable agriculture and rural development — all completed while training at local, national and international mainstream and farming

.....  
"There is huge potential to learn from, and collaborate with, each other to identify and close knowledge gaps and to ensure the agricultural and food beat maintains its place in global newsrooms,"

### Claire Mc Cormack

.....  
media outlets. Some titles include U.S. news magazine *Time*, Ireland's largest newspaper the *Sunday Independent*, and top Irish farming publications *Farming Independent*, *AgriLand* and the *Irish Farmers Journal*.

While pursuing her third master's degree — and at the same time, working as a

news editor — Mc Cormack discovered a lack of scientific research on media coverage of agriculture in Ireland. That became the driving force behind her Ph.D. studies at University College Dublin (UCD) School of Agriculture and Food Science, where she is now examining media coverage of agriculture and food in Ireland's mainstream and farming newspapers over the last 50 years.

Mc Cormack says her Ph.D. study, funded by the Irish Research Council with Dr. Tomás Russell as her supervisor, has opened nearly endless doors of opportunity. Through her connection with the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists, she also came to know Dr. Owen Roberts, the federation's former president and now director of the Dr. Jim Evans Agricultural Communications Initiative at Illinois. Roberts is a key advisor on Mc Cormack's research project.

Mc Cormack says the ALEC students she has met are uniquely positioned to succeed in their field.

"The students are developing in-demand skills that are, and will be, essential for communicating with farmers, the industry, and the public as all countries and continents move towards more sustainable food systems," she says.



Graduate students like Maddie Heidtke are also teaching assistants. She received a Canadian maple syrup thank-you gift from her class at the end of the 2023 fall semester. Photo courtesy of Owen Roberts

# What comes next—ALEC graduate program

By Rachel Ash

Earning an undergraduate degree in ALEC is a significant accomplishment. Once it's complete, some students may want to take the next step and apply to the ALEC graduate program.

Whether you just finished your bachelor's degree or have been in the workforce for a while, the ALEC graduate program is a great opportunity to further your education and prepare you to tackle the ever-changing agricultural industry.

A master's degree from ALEC can serve you in various ways. First, you will develop critical thinking and communication skills that will help you connect with others — and help connect

others with food and agriculture. It will also prepare you to develop impactful programs and initiatives around agriculture, food, natural resources and the environment.

The skills and experiences you can gain can be applied to any career — teaching, journalism, management, human resources, administration and outreach, among others. With a master's degree from ALEC, you will advance your career in many roles where leadership, education and communications skills are valued.

Affordable on-campus and online programs are available to meet your unique needs. There are currently 26

ALEC graduate students; half are on campus and half are online. You can complete an entire degree online if you are a working professional and being on campus full-time is impossible. You can take synchronous and asynchronous online courses. Students can choose one of three pathways: Applied Program Development, Applied Research and Teacher Licensure.



For more information, follow the QR code here or contact Dr. Eric Morgan, ALEC associate professor and graduate studies program director, at [elmorg19@illinois.edu](mailto:elmorg19@illinois.edu).



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# Why do some farmers shun electric vehicles?

Undergraduate researcher says regional differences are inevitable

By Easton Rosen

Electric vehicles are touted as one answer to reduce carbon pollution and agricultural emissions. But according to one researcher, unless they perform better on the farm than they do now, there won't be much uptake.

As part of an ALEC undergraduate research project in the fall semester of 2023, Olivia Charles found Illinois farmers have a poor perception of electric tractors. Through extensive surveys of 281 farmers and phone interviews with a portion of them, she uncovered widespread reluctance for the vehicles' adoption. Farmers mostly cited concerns about horsepower limitations and battery longevity.

These findings are important to the Illinois Corn Growers' Association (ICGA) and Illinois Soybean Association (ISA), who supported Charles' research. They

wonder how machinery electrification will influence the market demand for corn and soybeans by decreasing ethanol and biodiesel use.

"These commodity groups were built to support the needs of Illinois farmers, which positions them to share these potential benefits and limitations of new machinery," says Charles, an agricultural communications major.

She says her research shows that while most farmers lack enthusiasm about electric tractors, they also have not considered the connection between their harvests and machinery electrification.

Besides giving Charles an introduction to research, her study was instrumental in her professional development, fostering connections with industry professionals and producers. At press time, she was

busy preparing to present her findings at the University of Illinois' Undergraduate Research Symposium.

She hopes her research will influence agricultural machinery manufacturers' approach to electric farm vehicles and equipment, helping farmers put a more environmentally friendly foot forward.

"New ways to improve sustainability is at the forefront of Illinois farmers' minds, but farmers cannot be expected to make decisions that will negatively affect the efficiency or profitability of their farms," Charles says. "It's important for equipment manufacturers to closely follow the regional needs of farmers because growers in the vineyards of California have very different needs than the large-scale grain farmers of central Illinois."



Conventional machinery won't go out of date soon says Olivia Charles. *Photo courtesy of Olivia Charles*



Easton Rosen (left) is introduced to the Illinois assembly by Rep. Bradley Fritts on a visit to the state capitol.  
Photo courtesy of Rep. Bradley Fritts

## Keeping pace with Rep. Fritts

### Our scribe burns some calories visiting the state's youngest General Assembly member

By Easton Rosen

I'm no Eliud Kipchoge. But as an amateur athlete with the Illinois Cross Country Club, I'm in decent shape. And it's a good thing, too — because I sure burned some calories keeping up with Rep. Bradley Fritts when he hosted me for a look inside the Illinois state capitol in March.

Fritts (ACES '21) is the youngest elected member of the General Assembly. As such, he brings a fresh, youthful perspective to Springfield. And he's proud to say that the way he conducts himself is influenced heavily by the knowledge and experience he gained from his time as an ACES student.

He keeps a schedule that would tire most marathon runners.

#### **NOON**

There was virtually no time for greetings when I met Fritts on the House Floor, just before the start of what's called "session" at noon. He'd already had a long morning filled with meetings and committees, but he didn't show any signs of fatigue. Session is often when bills are debated and voted on. But on this day, representatives took time to speak on matters related to their district and constituents and to introduce visitors. Fritts used this chance to introduce me to the assembly and explain why I was at the capitol that day. He announced my major, my hometown, and that I was shadowing him to get a sense of what his job is like for the readers of *The Morrow*.

“Not only can various university majors and backgrounds prepare you for this job, but a diversity of degrees, ages, occupations, races and genders should also be represented.”

**Rep. Bradley Fritts**



## 12:30 P.M.

We left session early, had a short tour inside the capitol building, then settled in an office with two other representatives for a meeting with a high school delegation. They were there to discuss their experience with career and technical education (CTE) classes and how they could be expanded across the state. Fritts wanted to know how students' involvement with CTE classes helped them gain skills and explore their interests beyond high school.

## 1:15 P.M.

Fritts and I then rushed off to a meeting with the Secretary of State, Alexi Giannoulias. Fritts explained legislation that he is crafting about the testing required to obtain a certified driver's license (CDL) in Illinois; he hopes to make CDLs more accessible to Illinoisans with his bill.

## 2 P.M.

Then it was time for Fritts' Labor Committee meeting. On the day I was there, almost nothing started on time. While waiting for the meeting to start, it was interesting to witness how the representatives from both parties relaxed and enjoyed each other's company. Once they were all present, Fritts cast his vote, and we left within five minutes.

## 3 P.M.

Finally, after this busy afternoon, we had a chance to go back to Fritts' office to discuss some of his work and his background further. Fritts was elected to his first term in November 2022. He was initially concerned that as a young, inexperienced representative, he would have a disadvantage compared to older colleagues navigating the halls of power. But he was pleasantly surprised by how much the other representatives went out of their way to help him learn the ropes.

Fritts appreciates the diversity among his colleagues — in all facets of their lives. “Not only can various university majors and backgrounds prepare you for this job, but a diversity of degrees, ages, occupations, races and genders should also be represented,” he says. “We should aim to have the most diverse General Assembly because our decisions affect everyone.”

Fritts also appreciates the diversity of interests and backgrounds he found across the sprawling Illinois campus and within the College of ACES. Despite the size of the campus, he considered the college to be a welcoming community.

“ACES felt like a small neighborhood within an enormous institution,” he says. “I found like-minded people in my classes who came from rural farming families like me.”

Fritts also credited feeling at home in ACES by joining Collegiate Farm Bureau and the IlliDell Chapter of Alpha Gamma Sigma, an agricultural fraternity on campus.

## 4 P.M.

With our encounter finished, I head back to Champaign. Fritts had another meeting to get to and said he'd be working late into the night. I was amazed and impressed with how involved Fritts was at the capitol and how much respect he had garnered during just his first year on the job. It was so inspiring to see someone just a few years older than me initiating change in our state.

# An on-campus home for rural students

By Easton Rosen

College is said to be the best four years of your life. However, some students can feel intimidated and overwhelmed when they arrive on campus, having come from small high schools with few college prep resources.

That describes Liz Soellner's experience. Today, she's a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign senior majoring in neuroscience and sociology. But as a freshman from the small town of Chester, Illinois, — and with a graduating class of only about 50 — she was shocked at how unprepared she felt compared to non-rural students.

And she found she wasn't alone.

Ultimately, she connected with other rural students and created the Rural Area Student Initiative (RASI) to voice frustrations, share ideas and create a community. RASI now has rural and non-rural students and seeks to raise awareness of the education gaps and lack of resources in rural schools like those Soellner experienced.

RASI aims to create a home for rural students here on campus. Its members have started reaching out to high schools to help rural students make informed decisions about college, prepare them for the application process, and connect them with college prep resources.

Like Soellner, other RASI participants from rural backgrounds had similar troubling experiences.

“Coming to the University of Illinois from a rural area, I just automatically felt like I was behind other students,” says RASI membership director Ellie Parker, a sophomore in brain and cognitive science from Marissa, Illinois.

“When I got here, other kids were talking about, ‘oh, I took this many AP classes,’ and ‘I took this college class’ but we didn't have access to any of those during high school. I'm pre-med, and all these kids already had their gen eds completed, and I just felt like I was completely behind,” she says. “I felt behind and... a little lost, honestly.”

ALEC professor and RASI advisor Dr. Jasmine Collins conducts research in the ALEC program on underserved communities and how leaders can address the challenges they face. Collins and Soellner presented these challenges at Moraine Valley Community College at the end of February to raise awareness.



## It's a family affair

By Jersey Hesse

Agricultural education is a family affair for the Harmons of Morrisonville, Illinois. Mackenzie Harmon is a senior at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, studying agricultural education in the ALEC program. When she graduates this spring, she will become the new agriculture teacher and FFA advisor at Illini Bluffs High School. Her dad Bill Harmon changed his major twice before transferring to Illinois for agricultural education. He's now an agronomy professor and the agriculture program coordinator at Lincoln Land Community College where he's taught for 27 years.



Agricultural education students are key to organizing and delivering the Greenhand Leadership Conference at Illinois for prospective students. *Photo courtesy of Ryker Ewing*

## Feeling at home with agricultural education

By Ryker Ewing

When considering where to spend my four years of college, I chose the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign because of its agricultural education program, and my interest in becoming a teacher.

After speaking with agricultural education advisor Gary Ochs in the ALEC program, and seeing some of the student activities, I came to understand how much like a family this program can be.

I had never before felt like I was at home without actually being there. Now, I do.

Illini Alpha Tau Alpha (ATA), the agricultural education club, was the first ATA chapter anywhere. We're proud of that fact and of our deep roots in agricultural education around the entire state of Illinois.

We had the privilege and honor to host the first state convention for Illinois FFA. Today, we continue to hold many state events like Poultry Judging, Meats Evaluation and Technology, and Livestock Judging.

ATA tries to nurture the culture of feeling at home by holding social events, professional development events and monthly chapter meetings designed to share, educate and uphold the values of agricultural education.

In the fall semester, we had industry professionals join us to explain how agricultural education shaped their careers and how to balance work and social life. A current agriculture education teacher also met club members for a session on surveying.

If you're interested in learning more about how Illinois feels like home, email [uiucagedclub@gmail.org](mailto:uiucagedclub@gmail.org), and we'll be glad to connect.



We're all together and ready for the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis. Photo courtesy of Ryker Ewing

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ACES Dean Germán Bollero and ALEC TV host Elena Cleary prep for an interview at this year's Greenhand Leadership Conference. Photo courtesy of Owen Roberts



Designed by Taylor Talbert

## ALEC TV is on top of the news

By Elena Cleary

“Hello fellow agriculturalists and welcome to ALEC TV! I am your host, Elena Cleary.”

You’ll hear me say this introduction at the start of every episode of ALEC TV, the video publication I created last August. This bi-weekly, five-minute update on the ALEC program started as a talk show with ALEC co-interns (me, Taylor Talbert and Brooklyne Luessenheide) and then grew to become so much more ... not only for me and my future career in agricultural communications but to the ALEC program as a whole.

ALEC TV airs every other Monday on the ALEC TV YouTube channel. I create content, produce and anchor the publication. ALEC TV is designed to showcase our program for prospective

students, to give them an idea about the many facets of agricultural leadership, education and communications at Illinois. We believe it appeals to current students, active ALEC alumni and our generous supporters, as well.

Creating ALEC TV was like flying a plane as I was building it. While it was hectic, I realized I had all the creative freedom in the world. So instead of feeling overwhelmed, I embraced this opportunity and explored different ways I could make ALEC TV my own ... whether it was experimenting with Adobe Creative Suite for new openings and credits for the show, featuring an array of students and faculty, or interviewing guests such as our first visiting global agricultural journalist, Claire Mc Cormack.

Now that I have completed 10 episodes of the show, it’s safe to say that the ALEC TV “plane” knows the sky’s the limit and is going to reach for the stars.

I have loved getting to know everyone in the program through reporting on ALEC. Every person has a different story about why they are studying agricultural leadership, education and communications at Illinois. ALEC TV has woven me into the tight-knit community of teachers, classmates, and advisors.

Reporting on the ALEC program has immersed me further into the empowering academic community that I am exceedingly proud to call home.

# Building for the future

## ALEC students help launch new global communications center campaign



Agricultural Communications students Erica Johnson (left) and Jersey Hesse represented ALEC students at the Evans Center campaign launch. Photo courtesy of Owen Roberts

By Jersey Hesse and Erica Johnson

The College of ACES is never short on hands-on experiences. For example, in March, we were invited to Fort Worth, Texas, to participate in AgRally 2024 — a celebration of National Ag Day — and represent ALEC students at the launch of the new James F. Evans Global Center for Food and Agricultural Communications (see sidebar) campaign, live on RFD-TV.

One of the main organizers of AgRally is Lyle Orwig (AGCM '74),

one of America's most successful agri-marketers and an agricultural communications graduate from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Orwig facilitated the Evans Center announcement at AgRally with assistance from a core team that included Dr. Anna Ball, ACES associate dean for academic programs and ALEC director.

Jumpstarting the center and sharing it nationally with the public has lit a fire under agricultural communications enthusiasts nationwide. And it's just the beginning.

"It's a remarkable feeling to know that the center will be around to bridge several gaps — those between producers and consumers, and those between college students and professionals," says Erica Johnson. "As a soon-to-be alum, I will be entering the working world with a wealth of experiences from the agricultural communications program."

Adds Jersey Hesse: "I plan to apply for graduate studies here, and the new center will create research and project opportunities for not only me but companies and other motivated individuals who seek professional development and higher education."

At the AgRally, now in its fourth year, the students had an opportunity to meet with numerous agri-food communications and business professionals.

"Meeting with professionals in the industry always helps me define my career path," Hesse says. "In Texas, I was challenged as a student to also be professional and speak passionately about the sector. My education in the ALEC program gave me those skills."

Agricultural communications students are motivated by the growing gap between consumers and producers. They learn in class about how to close the gap; the Evans Center is destined to offer more opportunities to help accomplish that goal.

# Closing the rural-urban communications gap

By Dr. Owen Roberts

Since last fall, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has been working to create a communications education, professional development and research entity to bring balanced information about agriculture and food to the table.

The gap between food, agriculture and the public has widened, and we're convinced communications efforts will help.

So we've launched a campaign to create the James F. Evans Global Center for Food and Agricultural Communications. It will be dedicated to education, professional development and research.

At its core, the "Evans Center" will offer opportunities for professionals already in the field and to students in our undergraduate and graduate agricultural communications program that we've rebuilt with industry guidance over the past three years.

The center is named after storied Illinois agricultural communications pioneer Dr. Jim Evans. Beginning in the 1960s, Evans set the stage for balanced approaches to food and agricultural information at home and abroad, incorporating technology to bring communications professionals into the classroom.

The center will build on that foundation. Your participation is welcomed.

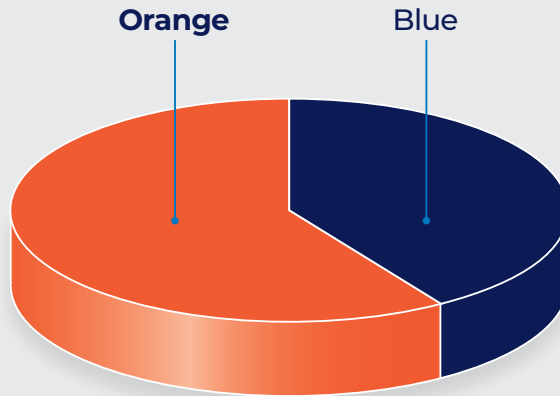


Agricultural communicators from near and far gathered on campus with Dr. Jim Evans (front, center) in January to discuss plans for a food and agricultural communications center.

# What do you think? ALEC students vote!



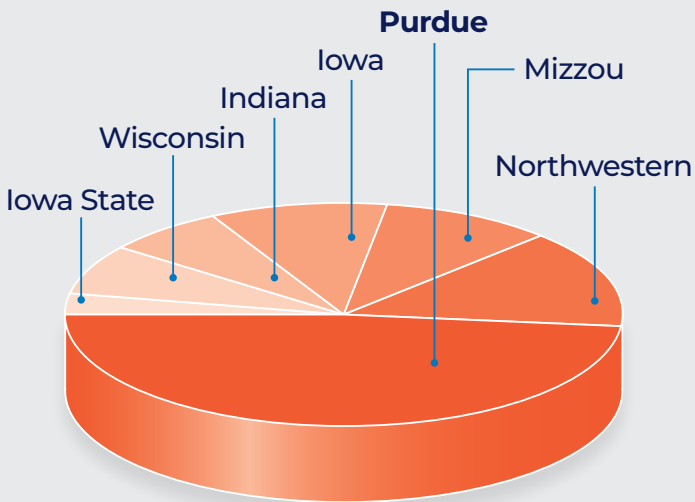
Sydney Gilbert



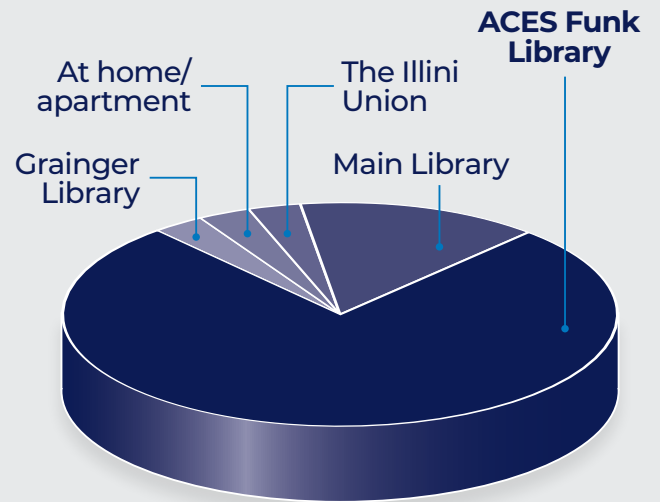
Orange or Blue?



Noah Rich



Who is Illinois' biggest rival?



Favorite study spot on campus?



Bryce McNeal



Ryle Duke



Nikola Grozdic



Patrick Wiemers

# A tale of resilience and love

## ACES graduate tells the real-life story of Barley the barn cat

By Jordi Oliver

At the McMillan family's thriving Hereford cattle operation near Princeton, Illinois, Barley the barn cat is a real-life workhorse.

He checks on show cattle. He keeps the dogs in line. He watches over farm equipment. He's appreciated by the McMillans, and vice versa.

But one day, something terrible happens on the farm. It's not his fault ... but what's he to do?

That's the premise for the children's story *Barley the Barn Cat*, based on the antics of Barley and crafted by family member Lauren McMillan (ACES '23).

The book is based on a true scenario. In the summer of 2022, a vicious barn fire broke out on the McMillan's farm, threatening the people and the animals whom Barley had come to love.

Lauren McMillan imagined a fairy-tale scenario in which Barley kicks into gear as flames start devouring the livestock barn. He risks it all to get the cows and other animals to safety while sending the dogs to wake the humans. Amidst chaos and fear, he succeeds in helping find a way for the animals to leave the barn.

Thankfully, no lives are lost.

But unfortunately, the barn can't be saved.

As the family members gather to watch their barn collapse in flames, Barley is overcome with grief. He blames himself for the loss, thinking he should have done more to save the barn. Filled with guilt, he flees the McMillan farm to hide in shame.

Three days pass. With time to think, Barley decides he feels too much love for his family to stay away. So he returns to the farm, prepared to face the consequences of letting the barn burn down.



Barley was the real-life muse for author Lauren McMillan's *Barley the Barn Cat* children's book.  
Photo courtesy of Jodi McMillan

But there's no harsh hello for Barley, or blame. Instead, he's welcomed with hugs, kisses and much love from his humans and animal friends. They appreciate his valiant efforts in thwarting a worse tragedy.

In the end, Barley comes to realize the true meaning of happiness for him and for the McMillans. It's not a product or an object — even an important one, like the barn. Rather, it's the love, community and family he has encountered on the way that's important.

For author Lauren, resilience is key. At the core of *Barley the Barn Cat* are big messages, such as never surrendering to despair. Even in the hardest times, like when the family's barn was destroyed, strength can be found.

McMillan says Barley's experience in her book underlines how life is about how we rise above our

challenges, not the challenges themselves.

"I truly wanted to show that there is always light in the darkness," she says.

*Barley the Barn Cat* is available on Amazon.

# Far from the wurst

## A class project led to the Brat of the Month Club

By Kora Malecek

As many as 20 kinds of cured and cooked meats are produced on campus for sale to students and the public at Illinois' Meat and Egg Sales Room. Brats are among the most popular items, and if you want to make sure you don't miss out, the Brat of the Month Club is for you.

Sadie Drayer, a senior studying animal science, came up with the idea and created the club in the LEAD 480 Collaborative Leadership course. Creating a community organization is a requirement of the course, so she decided to marry her background in animal science with her connections to the Meat Judging Team at Illinois.

She says patrons get new flavor experiences all year long.

"We pick flavors that match each month, so February's was a cherry chipotle, a play on 'spicy Valentine,'" Drayer says. "April's flavor was blueberry pineapple, so it's like an introduction to spring."

A 12-month membership in the club costs \$120. Proceeds support the Meat Judging Team to compete at contests across the U.S., judging beef, pork and lamb.

Drayer says the club has sold twice as many memberships as originally anticipated. On the horizon, it plans to offer six-month memberships, as well.

The Brat of the Month Club has helped build community awareness about the Meat and Egg Sales Room, where members pick up their monthly brat offerings.

"We've had multiple people come in and say that they didn't even know it existed, or they've never been here," Drayer says. "Now that they know that we're here and that we offer all these products, they come in every week."

For more information about the Brat of the Month Club, visit [meatandeggsales.illinois.edu/products/illini-brat-month-club-12-months](http://meatandeggsales.illinois.edu/products/illini-brat-month-club-12-months).



Class members Elena Cleary and Jordi Oliver. Photo courtesy of Owen Roberts

## How *The Morrow* grew

By Kora Malecek

*The Morrow* is described by alumnus Ava Oros, the first edition's photo edition (and now a John Deere employee) as being one of the closest experiences to a professional work environment that an ALEC student can get in college.

And after looking back at the labor put forward by this year's team, I wholeheartedly agree.

And while hundreds of readers receive *The Morrow*, and hopefully enjoy its variety of articles, photographs and advertisements, only a handful of people (including me) witness firsthand the semester-long effort it takes behind the scenes to nurture an edition of this magazine.

So, dear reader, let me take you there.

Our weekly routine revolved around meetings in our classroom, Room 122 of Bevier Hall. As soon as the clock struck half-past-three every Tuesday and Thursday, the doors closed, and our team got to work. We hit the ground running from day one, with students' roles in the magazine being fleshed out and assigned in the first week of class.

In week two, drawing on inspiration from past editions of *The Morrow* and other publications, stories were pitched by each team member to the entire group, in newsroom style. It was impossible to miss the passion that everyone had for their story ideas, even early on. Each idea was presented with enthusiasm. It made me wish we could use them all.

Throughout the semester, our class was also introduced to various professionals such as John Deere's Oros and design consultant Troy Courson of Image Graphics Enterprises Inc., who oversees the magazine layout.

Collaboration is key for making progress in a magazine. No question was left unanswered, and no suggestion was unheard. Halfway through the semester, a reflection was assigned to each student to provide feedback on what they felt could help streamline the process.

It was a semester-long effort that we could not be more proud to share with our readers. Thank you for looking inside *The Morrow* with me, and please enjoy!



# Family legacies: Hail to the orange, blue and agriculture, too

By Emily Brooks



Arnold Brooks, circa late 1950s. Photo courtesy of Emily Brooks

Everyone has someone who has profoundly shaped their lives. But for some, that realization doesn't come until it's too late.

For me, that someone was my grandpa, Arnold "Arnie" Brooks. I fondly refer to him as Pop, and I'm forever grateful for him fueling my passion for agriculture and the Fighting Illini.

My grandpa's life was marked by faith, determination and passion. He graduated

from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in December 1963, where he pursued a major in animal science. He was involved in Alpha Gamma Rho, Marching Illini and the livestock judging team.

He always shared stories about his time as a student and how Illinois provided him with the knowledge needed to return home to the farm.

In 1973, my grandpa and grandma, Jane Brooks, became the first generation of landowners in our family. They had a shared vision and goal: to establish a stable agricultural operation and secure our family's future. They took a huge risk by investing their entire life savings in a down payment on farmland. They had an unwavering commitment to building our family's agricultural legacy, and grandpa's education at Illinois was key to their success.

I learned the importance of respect from

my grandpa. I learned how to drive in his truck with him as my first passenger. I learned how to care for livestock from him. A moment that stands out in my memory is the pride, joy and sense of duty that radiated from him when he stood by as I pulled my first calf. It was a testament to his belief in me, and this experience strengthened our shared bond of passion for agriculture.

Ultimately, my grandpa's legacy serves as inspiration for attending Illinois and one day, returning home to our family farm.

My grandpa passed away more than a year ago, but I will always cherish the many memories I have with him. He will always be an inspiration to me, especially when I need an extra reminder to be respectful, compassionate and hardworking as I strive to continue his legacy.

*Emily Brooks' family farms in Prophetstown, Illinois.*

By Katie Landers

Finding your passion is a challenge. But my grandpa, Jerry Wallace, always made it look easy.

My grandpa studied at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and made a life that is deeply rooted in the agricultural sector. He never ran out of new stories and every story was filled with emotion. The university is the place where he met his wife, Chris, and his lifelong friends, and where he made connections that he'd carry into his career.

I have always been close to my grandpa, but I never envisioned myself following in his footsteps because I didn't grow up on a farm. When the time came to choose a university and a major, I felt lost. Despite my connection to my grandpa, I had no clear direction, no passion pulling me in a particular direction.

I hesitated, too, when my mom asked if I would be open to agricultural communications. I wasn't sure; my interests were in people and writing, not farming. But when I reflected on how my grandpa helped me discover agriculture, my views changed.

After all, he led me to join FFA — something else I'd never envisioned — and to love the blue corduroy jacket. He spoke with pride about the importance of agriculture. And as I listened, something stirred within me. I began to see agriculture not just as a hobby or something my grandpa did, but as a driving force of our world.

My grandpa's words lingered in my mind. And ultimately, when it came time to choose a university and major, I elected to carry on the legacy as a fifth-generation Illini.



Katie Landers and her grandpa Jerry Wallace. Photo courtesy of Katie Landers

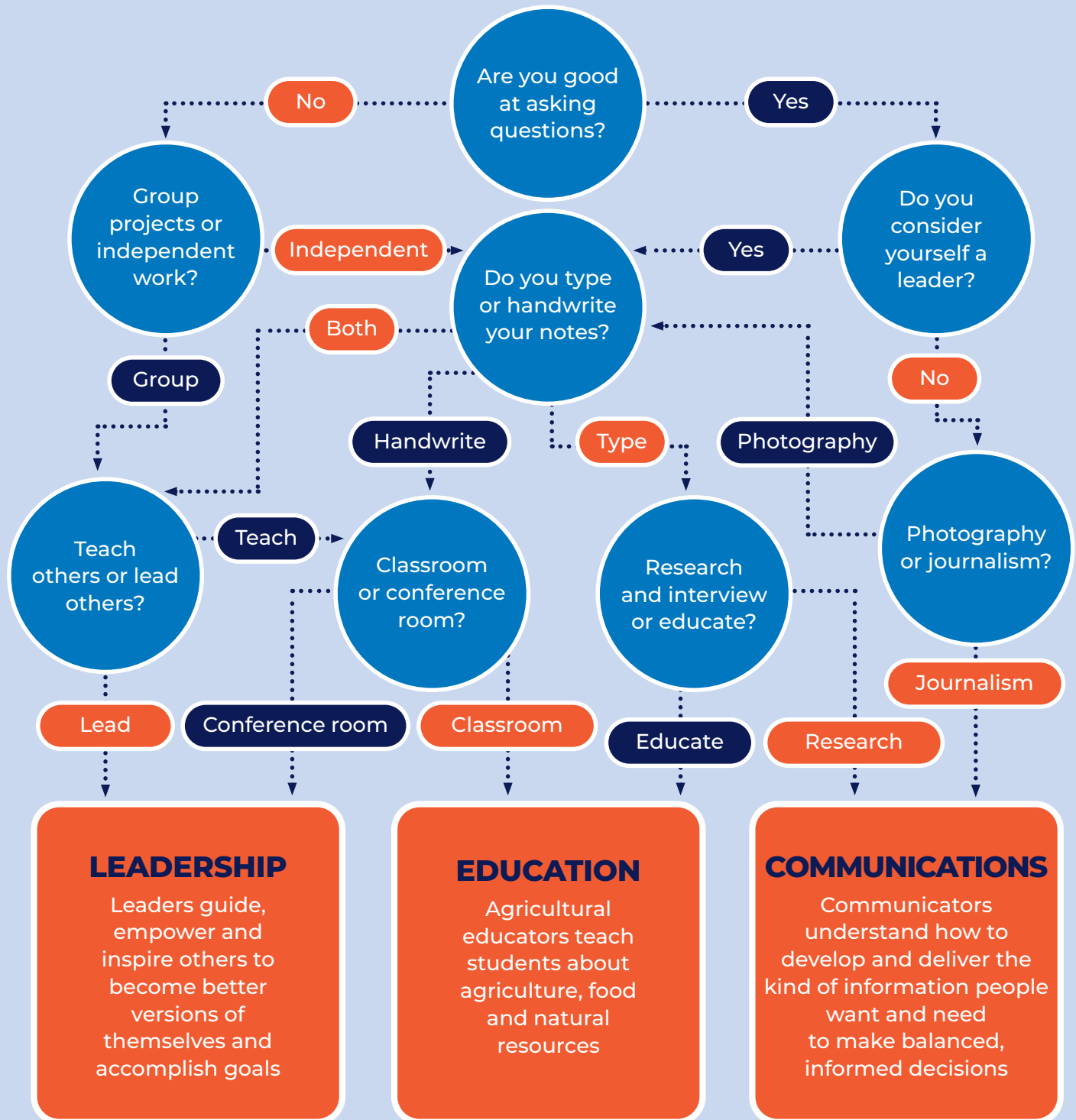
Now, I have found my passion in agricultural communications. As I look towards the future, I feel a sense of excitement and purpose knowing that I'm following in the footsteps of generations past, while carving out a path uniquely my own.

*Katie Landers' family farms in Champaign County, Illinois.*

# Which direction leads you home?

By Rachel Ash

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