

Class Is in Session

Whether it's four years in the classroom or a seasonal farm internship, education opportunities abound for today's farmers-in-training.

BY JILL GLEESON



To say that the Cornelius clan is big on ag college would be an understatement.

Three generations of the family, which has been working the land in the Bellevue, Iowa, area since the 1870s, have sought a formal farming education from Iowa State University. They have obtained degrees ranging from agricultural systems technology to animal science, and they've made good use of that higher learning: The family has owned and operated a successful seed business, Cornelius

Seed, since 1935, in addition to row cropping and raising cattle on their farm. By Will Cornelius' count, Iowa State has granted diplomas to 19 members of his family, most of them in agriculture.

Will is the most recent alum in the family. He graduated in 2009 with a bachelor's degree in agronomy, following that up in 2012 with a master's in technology and business. He parlayed these into three roles at

Cornelius Seed, where he serves as a certified crop adviser, soybean lead and agronomist for the company. Will doesn't think his educational experience differed much from that of his dad, beyond benefiting from technological advances—and paying a heftier tuition. But even with the skyrocketing cost of college, he says it's a crucial step for young people who want to farm, whether they grew up on one or not.



Chuck Cornelius records his observations in a test plot of corn.

CAMPUS: CHRISTOPHER CANNON/IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY; CORNELIUS SEED PHOTOS CO. THIS PAGE AND NEXT TWO PAGES: CHRIS CORNELIUS

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Cornelius Seed grows in an Iowa cornfield.

Field Experience

“For me, college wasn’t just about getting technical skills in a formal education setting,” Will says. “It was also about seeing the world and learning to deal with different types of people. If you’re going to farm, you need to know how people who didn’t grow up in a rural setting think.”

“As consumers continue to have a bigger say in what we do on our farms, we have to be able to share our methods and communicate with those people. By broadening your horizons you can do that more readily than if you stay in your local community.”

Will also says he believes his college internships at Golden Harvest and Channel seed

companies were powerful educational tools, helping drive home the lessons he learned in the classroom.

According to Thomas Coon, vice president of the Oklahoma State University Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, this kind of structured work experience is a popular trend in ag education. “There’s a much greater emphasis on internships today than there was even 10 years ago,” he says. “We have students who spend every summer of their college career in an internship.”

Will Cornelius (in black) walks members of his seed company’s sales team through a soybean plot.



Weighing the Options

The U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 American Community Survey found that 6.3% of Americans who have a bachelor’s degree earned the degree in agricultural, environmental or biological sciences. And USDA figures show that almost a quarter of established farmers—and more than a third of beginning farmers—have four-year college degrees.

But ag school isn’t for everyone, says Brock Moreland, a fifth-generation Nebraska Sandhills rancher who calves out more than a thousand cows each spring on an excess of 20,000 acres. Brock graduated from Sheridan College in Sheridan, Wyoming, with an associate degree in agricultural business in 2009. But he says,

“As long as I can successfully keep our family ranch operation working and in the black, I won’t require my children to go to college. Most of what I learned there was common sense and things I had a pretty good grasp of, having grown up on a cattle ranch.”

Still, it’s reasonable to presume that the faster technology evolves, the more critical agriculture school becomes. According to Richard Cavaletto, executive associate dean of California Polytechnic State University’s College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences, one of his college’s hottest areas of study is automation. With the U.S. labor market shrinking, he says, “we’ll see more automation filling



White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Georgia, leads on-farm workshops to help other farmers learn about sustainable agricultural methods.

that gap. Farmers will need to understand the economics of automation and how to put it in place and manage it. We're also in the process of developing a food safety minor. That's a big focus, too. Growers need to know how the practices they're doing in the field impact food safety down the line."

Also, Richard says, more students have begun pursuing soil health majors, part of the booming interest in organic production.

Sustainability continues to be a powerful trend, as Jodi Benoit learned when people looking for regenerative farming instruction began knocking on the door at her family's White Oak Pastures. A sixth-generation farm in Bluffton, Georgia, White Oak has become



Jenni Harris and Jodi Benoit with their father, Will Harris.

known for "radically traditional farming," which includes humane animal management practices, managed grazing and a zero-waste model.

"Sustainable farming wasn't even a thing," Jodi says of the early 1970s,

when her father studied animal husbandry at the University of Georgia. "He learned the complete opposite of what he's doing now. He farmed that way for many years, but in the mid-'90s he started transitioning our farm to a more regenerative way."

In addition to tending cattle and other animals, growing a few row crops, and offering in-farm lodging and dining, the family expands education opportunities by offering workshops to producers on topics ranging from composting to soil health.

"I'm planning one now about how we do prescribed grazing at White Oak Pastures," Jodi says. "We want to teach these farmers in a structured way. We're all trying to better the earth. That's the end goal here."

ANIMALS: LAURA MORTELLI; FAMILY: AMANDA GREENE; HANNAH BEALL; ANDY SAMS PHOTOGRAPHY; WOMAN AND COWS: UW-MADISON FISC

LEARNING BY DOING

Designed for students of all ages who don't have time to pursue a four-year degree, various hands-on programs offer fast-track ag training.

➔ FARMSHARE AUSTIN

Situated on a 10-acre certified organic mixed-produce farm 20 miles from Austin, Texas, Farmshare educates tomorrow's food producers today with its Farmer Starter program.

"The class meets Tuesday through Thursday for about 18 weeks with two sessions a year—one in spring and one in fall," says Andrea Abel, Farmshare's executive director. "We concentrate the program to three days a week to enable students to have other jobs or to ease commuting. Students also have the opportunity to live on the farm during the class."

Hannah Beall, who recently took over Hairston Creek Farm, outside Burnet, Texas, is a Farmer Starter fan. "It was a very enlightening, immersive experience that laid the groundwork for me to feel confident enough to venture out into my own farming career," she says.

"The days were split among field work, classroom work and farm visits, giving me a full-circle view of what goes into farming. I still have much to learn, but I know that Farmshare will be there when needed to support me in my goal of running a successful and sustainable organic farm."



Hannah Beall and daughter, Winnie, take a break at Hairston Creek Farm.



➔ FARM AND INDUSTRY SHORT COURSE

The University of Wisconsin offered its first short-term ag program in 1885, and today the tradition lives on with the 16-week Farm and Industry Short Course (FISC). Classes begin in late fall and end in early spring, so they don't interfere with the growing season. Students can also earn one of a variety of agricultural operations certificates by attending an optional second year.

The program's biggest benefit, says FISC Director Jennifer Blazek, "is getting the hands-on and applied education to help you be successful. What's awesome about FISC is you are taking courses that are going to directly apply to your farm or ag business. Also, I've been implementing changes to the certificates to really offer students the ability to individualize and personalize their education. You have the chance to tailor your certificate to your own interests and enterprises."

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GROWING FARMING'S FUTURE

These farms are teaching kids why agriculture matters—and planting seeds about pursuing a future in the field.



1 SHALOM FARMS

Founded with the mission to raise and distribute fresh, healthy food to communities lacking access to it, Shalom Farms is also busy teaching new generations of farmers.

Tucked away in Midlothian, Virginia, they offer summerlong internships for high school and college students, as well as apprenticeships dubbed "The Farmer in Residence" that last all season and include housing and a stipend.

And then there are the younger students, who come for educational visits and to volunteer. "These students learn a sense of sustainability and understand that they can actually take care of themselves if need be," says Krissy Lull, a third grade teacher at Byrd Elementary school who brings her pupils to the farm.

"One student, Lisette, is adamant she will be a farmer," Krissy adds, "because she said caring for the plants makes her happy."

2 BEAR BUTTE GARDENS

Michelle and Rick Grosek farm the USDA-certified organic Bear Butte Gardens, which sits on 120 acres outside Sturgis, South Dakota. They periodically host interns from high schools and colleges who come out for between a day and a whole growing season. Duties include preparing gardens, starting seeds, transplanting, weeding, and special projects like butchering poultry and building fences.

The Groseks especially value the fresh ideas the interns bring to the farm. "When you have someone come in and observe what you're doing for the first time, they often have a suggestion for something that could be done differently," Michelle says.

"We had a college and high school intern at the same time, and the two of them together really helped me to improve our food safety practices with harvesting and washing vegetables."

3 THE FARM

Located in Dobson, North Carolina, The Farm is owned by first-generation producers Mayghan and Josh Watson. In addition to growing veggies on their 90 acres, the couple welcome school field trips and offer internships to high schoolers. Among the educational fun for younger kids are a patch detailing the life cycle of a pumpkin and a cotton garden shaped like a T-shirt that explains how the plant transitions from seed to clothing.

"When school groups come out I always ask, 'How many of you are interested in growing up to become farmers?'" Mayghan says. "I love it when the little girls' hands pop up. I tell them, 'That's right, you don't have to be a boy to be farmer. You don't have to be old to be a farmer. You don't even have to wear overalls!'" 