



A Place to Belong

Student organizations at CALS offer personal growth, professional development and a fine way to create community.

By Joan Fischer



UW–Madison members of The Wildlife Society worked with the DNR to help build and move large pens as part of an elk restoration effort in northern Wisconsin.

They sell holiday roasts

and turkeys, fix lawn mowers and snowblowers for the public, grow and give away fruits and vegetables and volunteer in school classrooms. They present posters, hold fun runs and bike rides, give talks at national conferences and help manage wildlife around the state. They conduct community service and research projects around the world, doing their part to keep the Wisconsin Idea global.

And for the most part they do it themselves, with minimal assistance from faculty and staff.

These are just a few examples of activities conducted by members of student organizations, the hands-on social and preprofessional groups—nearly 1,000 of them are registered on the UW–Madison campus—that allow students to cultivate significant life skills while also creating community.

And they're a vital part of student life at CALS. Sarah Pfatteicher, CALS associate dean for academic affairs, sees student orgs—along with such activities as internships, independent research and study abroad—as a crucial component for students to take their learning “beyond the classroom,” to make their time at CALS an experience they have tailored by pursuing their unique blend of interests.

They're also a great way to make a big campus feel more like home, Pfatteicher notes. “We tell students, ‘You wouldn't move to a city of 60,000 people and expect to suddenly know everything about the city,’” she says. “You pick a neighborhood within that city, and you get to know your neighbors, you get to know the restaurant on the corner.”

Of all the enriching activities available to students, Pfatteicher notes, the key advantage of student organizations is embedded in the name. “Student orgs are student-organized, right? They allow students themselves to identify interests, develop their own bylaws, set their own membership requirements—to come together and really be in charge of what they're doing. That helps develop student autonomy and maturity in ways that other experiences maybe can't.”

And let's not forget they're a lot of fun. Here's what a half dozen student orgs at CALS are up to.

Helping Wild Wisconsin

Once upon a time, elk roamed plentifully throughout the land that would become Wisconsin. By the late 1800s they had vanished from the landscape, victims of overhunting and loss of habitat. Efforts to reintroduce elk in northern Wisconsin have expanded in recent years—and the UW–Madison chapter of The Wildlife Society (TWS), the nation's premier society for wildlife professionals, has been part of the effort.

Over the past three years, students have worked with elk herds alongside wildlife managers and volunteers. They put their muscles and passion into building fencing for large pens—one of them 1,600 feet long and eight feet high, encompassing four acres—used to contain elk being moved from Clam Lake to vacant elk habitat southeast of Winter. Recently students helped take down that fence and move materials to the Flambeau River State Forest, where a seven-acre pen will be built to quarantine elk brought in from Kentucky.

Laine Stowell, an elk biologist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, is grateful for the students' assistance. “Their participation provides an abundance of enthusiasm and youthful strength,” notes Stowell. “We get a lot of work done in a short period of time, and all it costs us is food and lodging. We share our experience and time, they share their efficient effort, and we all accomplish excellent things for Wisconsin elk!”

Recent chapter president Lucas Olson BS'16 working on elk reintroduction among his most cherished TWS memories. As icing on the cake, he received a scholarship from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in part for his student leadership in that effort.

Like many TWS members at UW, Olson is proud of the group's special legacy in Wisconsin. “Wildlife management's roots can be attributed to one of UW–Madison's own—Aldo Leopold,” he notes. “Leopold's tie to our department gives me a huge sense of pride. Leopold's connection to TWS is one of great importance as well, as he was one of the first presidents as the society was taking off in the late 1930s. My involvement with TWS has been richer because of this, and has made my experience at UW–Madison extremely significant.”

In addition to hands-on wildlife management help, UW TWS activi-

Below: Dietetics and Nutrition Club member Carley Bosshard (second from left) helped out at a REAP local veggie-tasting event at Samuel Gompers Elementary School in Madison.

ties include birding, helping with prairie burning and research projects, participating in regional and national conferences (including an annual quiz bowl at the national meeting), and holding an annual game dinner and fundraiser.

“I am in my major—wildlife ecology—because of the club,” says senior Daniel Erickson. “Through all the classes and field trips, I have made such a great group of long-lasting friends and connections with professors. TWS allowed me to realize that I have always had a passion for animals, nature and the great outdoors.”

Good Food for All

Students who study nutrition understand the importance of healthy food. And, as members of the Dietetics and Nutrition Club (DNC), they are committed to sharing their knowledge and

excitement about healthy food with people of all ages, from all walks of life.

Hanna Hindt participates in a club program with Porchlight, a Madison nonprofit offering emergency shelter and other support services for the homeless. “We get to talk with members of the community and answer questions about their own diet and food choices and those of their friends and family,” she says. “It’s a great way to apply what we’ve been learning in our nutrition classes.”

And, since Hindt hopes to have a career working with people for whom buying food is a constant challenge, the experience offers good professional training as well. “I’m able to get a feel for what a typical diet is for the low-income population—the daily challenges they face, and common health problems within this group,” Hindt says. “This background will help me approach and personalize nutrition

counseling and offer reasonable and manageable options and advice within their limitations.”

Fellow DNC member Jackson Moran participates in club activities with REAP, a nonprofit that strengthens ties between growers, consumers and community institutions. DNC students help out at REAP events including Chef in the Classroom, where local chefs prepare meals with kids, and Family Food Fest, a community farm-to-school event. Moran has learned a lot about getting kids to eat their veggies. “It’s important for parents to be on board with a healthy diet, and to keep healthy foods available in the home,” Moran says. “Also, children will be much more likely to eat new, healthy foods when they can be involved in preparation, or have some interactive role.”

Other DNC activities include running exploration stations at Saturday Science in the UW–Madison Discovery Building and holding nutrition-themed Lunch & Learns—expert talks for faculty, staff and students. The club’s biggest annual event is “Dinner with Dietitians,” where club members prepare a meal for nutrition professionals at an evening of networking and panel discussion.

Recent DNC vice president Maria Gruetzmacher BS’16 helped plan that event, and cites that experience and many other DNC activities as pivotal to her personal and professional development.

“These experiences have taught me how to be more proactive and work collaboratively, and have strengthened my event-planning skills,” Gruetzmacher says. “With each event I participated in, I met new members, each with a different path and unique ideas. I was also able to meet practicing registered dietitians who allowed me to shadow them and provided meaningful advice.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY LATHAM



Right: The UW–Madison Dairy Judging team in action.

Below: UW members of MANRRS pose at a national conference.

Ringing Success

What makes a perfect dairy cow? It takes a trained eye to notice bovine features that hold great promise for the milking parlor. A tight udder, yes, but also the more subtle points: lean thighs, a sweeping rear slant to the ribs, a long neck, a fluid stride. And a skilled judge has to back up numeric scores by stating reasons in terms the dairy industry recognizes.

In other words, dairy judging takes some training. And that's what students receive when they participate in the UW–Madison Dairy Judging Program, run through the CALS Department of Dairy Science. Students hailing from the Dairy State have a long, proud history of success, winning nearly a dozen national dairy judging team championships and scores of individual awards.

That success is extremely gratifying to coach Chad Wethal, who feels that the program offers students benefits well beyond academic credit. Dairy judging, he says, allows students to develop their decision-making and verbal communication skills—and it helps them build confidence.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAD WETHAL

“I am always amazed at how much they learn from each other,” notes Wethal. “There are many life skills that are built through participating in this program, but the key benefit is the camaraderie that is built within the team. Students can expect to form lifelong friendships with their fellow teammates.”

Students attest that the benefits run deep.

“When I entered the program I felt as though I saw cows very well, thanks to my 4-H dairy judging coaches and also my parents,” says Jordan Ebert, raised on a dairy farm, whose team placed second at a recent National Intercollegiate Dairy Judging Contest at World Dairy Expo. “Once I got into the program, my judging ability and public speaking

expanded and improved. I added more terms and vocabulary, along with having more confidence and energy.”

And the rewards last long after students graduate. “You get to see all of your work and determination pay off when you realize just how much you have learned, not only about cows but also about yourself,” says Laura Elliott BS’12, reflecting on her team’s many honors during her dairy judging time at UW.

A Warm Welcome

It can be tough to attend a school where you’re a racial or ethnic minority—and even tougher to choose a major in which others of your background are rarer still.

Enter “Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences”—MANRRS for short—a national professional development society with a vibrant student chapter based in CALS. Through regional and national conferences, scholarships, competitions, service activities and development opportunities that begin in middle school, MANRRS offers a warm welcome and support to students who might not otherwise see themselves in STEM careers.

“On a social level, MANRRS allowed for me to meet and be connected with individuals who looked like me working on higher degrees in academia,” says Maya Warren PhD’15, a longtime member and past national officer of MANRRS. “On a professional level, MANRRS has allowed me to



PHOTO COURTESY OF EMMA LOPEZ



UW–Madison members of the Undergraduate Biochemistry Student Organization at the annual meeting of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology earlier this year, where they did exceptionally well in the research poster competition.

hone in on my leadership skills in ways that I would have never expected.”

Warren is now a lead food scientist, aka “tastemaker,” with the food franchising company Kahala Brands, focusing on their portfolio brands Cold Stone Creamery and Pinkberry. She became a highly visible face of UW–Madison—and a role model of grit and grace for MANRRS members—when she and fellow food science grad student Amy DeJong two years ago won “The Amazing Race,” a reality show on CBS with a \$1 million prize.

For many students, MANRRS comes to feel like a second family. Abigail Catania, a junior majoring in agricultural business management, joined Junior MANRRS while attending the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, a public magnet school. Over the years she went on to hold numerous leadership positions, including serving as UW chapter president beginning in her freshman year and also serving as a national officer.

“MANRRS has had a huge impact not only on my undergraduate experience, but on my life in general,” Catania says. “It provided me with a lot of support not only academically but professionally and personally as well. MANRRS has contributed to many of my successes while attending UW, including being offered an internship with John Deere as just a freshman.”

MANRRS secretary Emma Lopez, a senior food science major, credits MANRRS with helping her land an internship with Covance, a contract

research organization providing drug development and animal testing services. Covance is one of several companies that regularly recruit MANRRS members.

“Covance values students who demonstrate a personal investment in their learning and development through participation in organizations such as MANRRS,” says Rebecca Verhulst, a senior manager with Covance in global university and diversity relations. “In our experience, the diverse perspectives and experiences of MANRRS’ talent helps us to think in new, different and insightful ways, delivering innovation in every patient room, at every lab bench and every client meeting.”

Meet Your Major

Here’s a little-appreciated fact about biochemistry majors: they have to be a bit more patient than most students. A long run-up of science prerequisites keeps most of them busy their freshman and sophomore years, so that often their introduction to biochemistry gets pushed back.

They can help bridge that gap by immediately joining the Undergraduate Biochemistry Student Organization (UBSO), which brings biochem students together for faculty presentations and discussion, leads on job and internship opportunities, preprofessional advising, national conference attendance and “just fun” stuff like Picnic Point bonfires and ice-skating socials.

“It’s important for students to begin

understanding their major as soon as possible,” says biochemistry professor Doug Weibel, who frequently gives talks for the group. “The biochem department has been actively reorganizing the curriculum to introduce biochemistry courses earlier. UBSO provides a complementary resource to our majors.”

It’s a resource that students appreciate. “UBSO is the one organization where everyone understands what you’re experiencing academically, as a biochemistry major, in terms of classes, research and applying for grants and internships,” says recent UBSO academic chair Quinn Vatland BS’16. “This meant that it was really easy to receive advice on which classes to take, what scholarships to apply for and even the best way to study the trp operon. The UBSO meetings themselves also let me get a lot of professional advice—resume workshops, career advising and research tips—but they are also pretty casual, so I made friends, too.”

Members take the “pay it forward” approach to heart when it comes to mentoring younger students.

“Every time there is a scared little freshman or sophomore that walks through the door and wants advice about getting into research or about classes, and what to take and how to study, I love it,” says recent UBSO president Amal Javaid BS’16. “I love answering questions and reassuring people that I’ve been through what they are going through, and it will be okay. Past officers did that for me when I was an underclassman, and now I take a lot of pleasure in giving back. This year we, as a board, have helped at least five underclassmen find research jobs, and that is definitely super refreshing and rewarding.”

Faculty members do some serious mentoring as well. Every year biochemistry professor Michael Cox takes a group of seniors to the annual meeting of the American Society for Biochemistry and

Creative nutrition: Students on a food product development team cooking up the Walking Wok in a campus lab kitchen.

Molecular Biology (ASBMB), where they compete in an undergraduate research poster competition.

“Our students always do very well,” Cox says with pride. “Our students this year represented less than 5 percent of the some 230 students from across the country in the competition. However, we took 25 percent of the prizes.”

UBSO is in the process of reorganizing to become a student chapter of the ASBMB, Cox notes. “This will make it part of a national organization, with a number of benefits,” Cox says.

Team Temptations

They bear names like “Blissful Bites,” a vanilla yogurt nugget coated with crunchy oats, flax and puffed rice; “Pixie Dust,” freeze-dried, powdered fruit that becomes a smooth, nutritious drink when mixed with milk or water; and “Walking Wok,” a chicken and vegetable stir-fry wrapped in a gluten-free tortilla.

But as fun and delicious as these treats sound, they required the CALS student teams who created them to draw on everything they’d been learning in food science. The products were developed to compete in national food industry contests sponsored by Disney and Mars, Inc. And they had to meet exacting standards on everything from nutrition, taste and texture to food safety, shelf life, pricing and market appeal.

“Being on a product development team helped develop my critical thinking skills while teaching me more about the industry and how to be flexible, because in the competitions you are responsible for all aspects of the product,” says Amy Parr BS’16, who helped develop the Walking Wok. “It gives you at least a little bit of insight into everything.”

The food product development teams from CALS regularly take top prizes for their work—and no one is



more impressed than food science professor Rich Hartel. “We teach them the basic science for them to apply—but other than that, these teams are completely student-driven. The students form their own teams, develop their own products and submit the product ideas to the competitions.” They also present their products at national conferences, where they have an opportunity to network with industry professionals.

These professionals, too, are impressed by CALS students, according to Tracy Matteson BS’99, an associate principal scientist at the Kraft Heinz Company who spent several years as a company recruiter and as a student competition judge—and who participated on food product development teams while at CALS. “The only thing that looks more impressive to an employer, beyond demonstrating strong communication and leadership skills, is being an engaged member of the product development teams,” she says. 📌

Learn more about these and other student organizations at <https://win.wisc.edu/organizations>.



A Home for Student Orgs

Student organizations, along with other “beyond classroom” activities that enrich the student experience, will soon get a new home: the former Agricultural Dean’s Residence, familiar to many as the lovely Queen Anne house located in Allen Centennial Garden.

In addition to student organizations, the residence will house career services/corporate recruitment, alumni mentoring activities and international study programs, all of which are currently challenged by a lack of space.

The residence is undergoing renovations to serve its exciting new purpose. To learn more, and to consider making a gift, please visit: supportuw.org/giveto/calsdeanshouse