



**CLAYTON YEUTTER INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND FINANCE**

Students benefit from Yeutter Institute's multidisciplinary approach, mentorship, experiential learning

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Savannah Gerlach, who graduated in May from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has begun work as a commodity trader with agribusiness giant ADM. Aline Abayo, a 2022 UNL alum, is working as an African issues specialist with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Victoria Diersen, a UNL senior, is spending this summer as an intern in the global market division of investment bank Goldman Sachs.

All three credit UNL's Clayton Yeutter Institute of International Trade and Finance, which is marking its fifth anniversary, for giving them a broad-based understanding of global trade issues that's proven vital for their personal advancement. Jill O'Donnell, the Haggart-Work director of the institute, provides important academic guidance, they say, and helps students make connections that open up promising opportunities for internships and post-graduation employment.

The institute's multidisciplinary approach — with study encompassing economics, law, business practices and policy-making — gives students a broad-based foundation that equips them well for internships and post-graduate employment.

“Of all my involvement through college, I would say that the Yeutter Institute is the most focused on helping students find success in their career,” says Gerlach, a Dewitt, Nebraska, native. “They're extremely focused and dedicated to making sure that students are successful.”

Gerlach's trade-related experiences as a UNL undergraduate included an internship with the Washington International Trade Association as the first recipient of the Steve Nelson Yeutter Institute International Trade Internship Award. The courses, experiences and guidance provided by the institute, she says, “gave me a direction and aligned my interests and my experiences. It gave me a new avenue I never would have found without the Yeutter Institute.”

Abayo, a native of Rwanda who graduated in 2022 with a bachelor's degree in integrated sciences, says O'Donnell's support as a mentor “was really helpful to me in deciding what I wanted to do.” Abayo attended UNL as part of the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural

Resources Undergraduate Scholar Program, an exchange initiative that supports Rwandan scholars.

The connections O'Donnell facilitated with trade professionals and organizations "have really helped me now," Abayo says. "She was my go-to person when it comes to trade. She knows almost everything and almost everyone when it comes to DC."

"Being at the Yeutter Institute was eye-opening for me in seeing how many opportunities there are when it comes to trade," Abayo says.

Students benefit in a variety of ways from the Yeutter program. A speaker series enables students to hear directly from trade specialists from various professions. Student research projects focus on issues facing real-world companies. Simulations introduce students to the dynamics and complications involved in trade negotiations and policy-making.

Yeutter student fellows

Diersen is a Yeutter student fellow, as were Gerlach and Abayo. The student fellows, most often juniors, are a cohort of undergraduates from a range of academic majors. They spend an academic year together as a group, "really honing professional skills in the context of trade policy," O'Donnell says. "They meet with experts in the field and learn directly from people working on international trade in government, business, research, and international organizations."

The student fellows meet regularly as a group to discuss trade-related issues. In the spring semester, they do a project together. "This year they did a consulting project for a global company considering an investment in Central Asia," O'Donnell says. "So, they tackled a real challenge for a real company and presented recommendations the executives can act on."

"I love being a Yeutter Institute student fellow because it's created a network of former students," Diersen says. "We get to work with one another, bounce ideas and ask questions. I learn so much from the questions my fellow student fellows have asked." Also, "it gives us an opportunity to interact not only with other students but also with other UNL faculty and professionals in industry."

Gerlach says she was inspired as a high school student by a presentation O'Donnell made at a Nebraska Agricultural Youth Institute, a summer program on UNL's East Campus for high school juniors and seniors. O'Donnell's enthusiasm for studying international trade awakened an interest for Gerlach.

"I just remember Jill coming on the stage and talking about trade in a way that I'd never heard it described," Gerlach says. "She was extremely passionate, so sophisticated, so well put together. You could tell she really cared about the institute and what she was talking about. I remember thinking, 'If someone like Jill can do this kind of career and be so passionate about it, I can see myself doing it as well.' From that moment, I thought I wanted to get involved with whatever she's doing, and she would be a really excellent role model for me."

Similarly, Diersen learned of O'Donnell's international trade and policy class through a flyer she saw her sophomore year. "I had very little background on those topics, but it sounded like just a really interesting class that would expand my view within economics. So, I decided to sign up for the class and about three weeks in, it quickly became my favorite course I have taken on campus."

The course expanded her perspective on the study of economics. "Just the way that all the trade policies interact with one another, I realized just how crucial it was to economics, and I decided I wanted to continue to take more courses within that realm."

Diersen found value in a Yeutter mini-course on trade tensions between the U.S. and China. The course also provided detailed looks at Southeast Asia trade dynamics.

Institute's beginnings in 2018

O'Donnell began work as the institute's director in July 2018 and introduced experiential learning early on by establishing a trade negotiation simulation course. "I wanted to quickly get together a group of students and start working with them while I was going through the longer process of creating the curriculum and getting approval for that," she says.

The trade negotiation simulation class was taught by veteran trade negotiator Andrea Durkin, now the assistant U.S. trade representative for the World Trade Organization and Multilateral Affairs. The experience from that class benefited students greatly through its realistic nature and examination of complications, says Justin Myers, a 2021 UNL alum who was in the first cohort of Yeutter student fellows.

The Durkin-facilitated sessions were "my first experience with hypothetical foreign relations negotiations" and were impressive in explaining problem-solving in a trade policy setting, says Myers, an Omaha native. "That's an area I'm hoping to work in" as a career, says Myers, who is studying law at George Mason University and working part-time as a law clerk to the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

"Students have always been front and center in this institute," says O'Donnell, a Columbus, Nebraska, native and UNL professor of practice. "That hands-on experiential learning piece is really important."

O'Donnell created and teaches a course on international trade policy and politics, complementing the Yeutter program's instruction on trade-related law, economics and business topics. A central aim of her course is to get students "to really think about how trade policy is made — why do we get the outcomes that we get, and what are the second- and third-order effects of these policies and the tradeoffs involved."

UNL this fall will begin offering a minor in international trade, expanding students' academic options.

O'Donnell earned a master's degree from the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and was a foreign policy aide to then-Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska. She

has worked for the NATO Communications and Information Agency and done research projects for the Asia Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations.

O'Donnell has shown valuable leadership in building the Yeutter Institute program from the ground up, working collaboratively with a range of parties to construct the broad-based curricular infrastructure and offer strong opportunities for students, the institute's three faculty chairs say.

"She has done tremendously on all fronts, from vision to energy to implementation," says Matthew Schaefer, the Clayton Yeutter Chair and a professor in the College of Law. Schaefer is one of three Yeutter Institute faculty chairs, along with John Beghin, the Mike Yanney Chair and a professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics, and Ed Balistreri, the Duane Acklie Chair and associate professor in the College of Business.

O'Donnell, Schaefer notes, brings in top-notch presenters, has assembled a strong advisory board, organizes a national conference every other year, and advocated for the institute's international trade minor that will launch this fall.

That leadership extends to teaching, Schaefer says, since the university had no course on trade policy until O'Donnell created the course and began teaching it.

O'Donnell, Beghin says, showed impressive vision and consensus-building skills in bringing UNL faculty and administrators, as well as stakeholders, aboard in supporting key strategic steps the institute has taken. She "is very credible with interest groups in Nebraska. So, very quickly we've had credibility and legitimacy with the Farm Bureau, the CME (Chicago Mercantile Exchange) and similar groups. And the lineup on the advisory board is outstanding with people in leadership positions, and a heavy mix in business."

O'Donnell's trade policy course benefits students in economics, law or business by broadening their exposure to trade-related factors, Beghin says. "By the end of semester they get an understanding of how the politics and governments interact in international trade," he says.

Cross-disciplinary approach

The cross-disciplinary approach promoted by O'Donnell has demonstrated its value by providing students with a fuller understanding of the range of factors affecting international trade. The program's interdisciplinary nature, Balistreri says, goes far in moving the discussions from academic abstraction to a fuller consideration of complex and challenging real-world conditions.

"Especially for economic students, they get an exposure to the policy world they don't get otherwise," he says. "Jill's class brings this policy perspective back in, and that speaks to a broader world."

In addition, Balistreri says, O'Donnell and the three faculty chairs — in ag economics, law and business — have developed "a super relationship" in moving forward with a common vision. "Coming into this three years ago," he says, "I couldn't have imagined a more ideal situation."

“It’s a multidisciplinary approach to teaching,” says Beghin. “It provides good opportunities to learn about international relations — the politics, the economics, the agribusiness dimensions. It’s a good mix of analytical skills and operational skills.”

The Yeutter Institute welcomes students from any major, and that academic diversity has enriched the program from its beginning. Having instructors and presenters from different academic fields makes for a stronger educational experience, says Abayo, the UNL alum working as an African issues specialist with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

That breadth of academic backgrounds extends to the institute’s student fellows, who form a cohort of undergraduates spending an academic year together in common trade-focused activities. Abayo, who majored in economics, says the notable variety of majors within her student fellow cohort regularly produced worthwhile discussions, broadening students’ understanding.

The institute’s interdisciplinary approach fits in with the example set by Clayton Yeutter himself. Yeutter (1930-2017), a Eustis, Nebraska, native, earned three degrees from UNL: a bachelor’s of science; a law degree; and a Ph.D. in agricultural economics. His career encompassed the private sector, as president of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, as well as agricultural economics and government service as U.S. secretary of agriculture and U.S. trade representative.

“Trade policy is all about real-world issues,” says Christine McDaniel, the Yeutter Institute’s nonresident fellow who has held positions with the U.S. International Trade Commission and the U.S. Treasury Department. A strong foundation in one’s academic specialization is essential, she says, but in addition, “you have to bring the experts together from all different corners.”

“It’s absolutely true that international trade is a very interdisciplinary field,” says Georgetown law Professor Katrin Kuhlmann, an Omaha native and trade specialist who has taught two mini-courses to UNL students through the Yeutter program. “These are really complex questions we’re grappling with. The solutions are not going to come from just one area of study or professional focus. I see this more and more with trade.”

Students in the College of Law have benefited from opportunities to study trade issues in greater breadth, Schaefer says. The Yeutter Institute, for example, offers mini-courses on special trade topics through the Law College to law and grad students, taught by outside trade law experts.

These expanded opportunities have benefited students who applied for internships, Schaefer says, including one student working this summer for a vehicle manufacturer and another working at a trade consultancy in Washington, D.C. The breadth of trade-focused studies available at the College of Law gave the students an “expanse of expertise” that stood out to their interviewers, he says.

Clayton Yeutter’s example

Clayton Yeutter’s knowledge in business, law and ag economics was a key factor making him an effective government leader and trade negotiator, Balistreri says. Economists offer needed analysis in regard to trade issues, but it’s important to buttress that analysis with insights from

business practices and law. Through such an approach, Balistreri says, “the policy influence is multiplied.”

Clayton Yeutter “had a vision that not many people have,” Kuhlmann says. “He saw how all those pieces come together. I love that this is the legacy that's been passed on from all of his experience, and that this is something that's living now at UNL. It's such an incredible gift to the students.”

“I think my favorite thing about the Yeutter Institute was the connection that they had with Clayton Yeutter,” says Gerlach, now working with ADM. “All the time we were learning about his ideals, the way that he approached trade negotiations, how he saw the world.” An important observation from him, Gerlach says, is that “no deal is a good deal unless it benefits both parties.”

Another plus for the program is how it explains the many connections linking Nebraska and the global economy, Gerlach says. The Yeutter program “has been very valuable for me,” she says, “because they never fail to tie agriculture that we do here in Nebraska to things that are happening all across the world.”

In 2021, Nebraska achieved record ag exports. The state’s overseas sales topped \$9 billion for the first time.

“International trade has huge implications for everything, whether you know it or not,” says Diersen, from Brookings, South Dakota. “There are so many layers on this issue. You can’t go a single day in your life without being affected by the implications of global trade.”

Schaefer notes: “To have an institute that can look at these issues is incredibly important for Nebraska.”

Nebraska commodity boards understand the value of international trade, and it’s important for Nebraska to create conversation and education to bolster the understanding of the global marketplace, says Kelly Brunkhorst, executive director of the Nebraska Corn Board.

The Yeutter Institute “is playing a key role in creating those conversations, creating the platform for classes, with faculty leaders with a strong interest in trade, and in creating those conversations and education and opportunities for students,” says Brunkhorst, a member of the institute’s Advisory Council. “The education of our students is foremost in building that foundation of understanding.”

Our country doesn’t consume all we produce, Brunkhorst says, “so when that final bushel of corn or that final pound of red meat is exported,” with major effects on commodity prices, “we need to be engaged in those opportunities to make sure we have the markets around the world and the needed trade agreements. It's key.”

Student opportunities, public outreach

To maximize the accessibility for students, the institute has consolidated its internship information into [one online location](#).

The institute provides internship awards to help defray the higher living costs that students can face in large cities, O'Donnell says. Gerlach expressed gratitude for the \$6,000 Nelson/Yeutter internship award she received, sponsored by the Yeutter Institute and the Nebraska Farm Bureau, which allowed her to intern with the Washington International Trade Association, saying it was a big help to her.

Research projects tied to real-world needs are another tool the institute uses to help students gain broad, practical understanding. For the past three summers, undergraduates in Ag Economics and the College of Business have done 10-week internships analyzing economic issues brought by external stakeholders. Among the research topics: New export markets for farm equipment. Building a database of exporters and importers in Nebraska for the state Department of Economic Development. Sales prospects for Nebraska biorenewable products.

In addition, UNL faculty, graduate and undergraduate students conduct significant research work on a variety of projects through the Yeutter Institute, often in collaboration with outside researchers. Topics include biotech approval regulation for genetically modified corn; factors affecting food security; and the effects of nontariff barriers on agricultural exports.

McDaniel, the institute's nonresident fellow, is overseeing a major project involving academic, government and industry participants, analyzing international trade in agricultural biotechnology.

Public outreach is another focus for the institute. "We try to make everything we do here really accessible to everyone," O'Donnell says, "whether that is a high school teacher looking for a little content they might put into a social studies or business class, or through our public events where people can engage with current and former policy makers and private-sector leaders."

In that spirit, the institute has created an online [Trade Policy Toolkit](#) consolidating more than 25 hours of the institute's wide-ranging podcast and webinar content into a menu of options that educators can use. Every other year, the institute hosts a [major international trade conference](#) in which Nebraska stakeholders hear from experts.

In 2019, the institute partnered with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in holding listening sessions across the state to hear Nebraskans' views on international trade and the state's global connections. The findings, compiled in a [comprehensive report online](#), showed a notable global awareness among many Nebraskans.

"The attentiveness and knowledge that Nebraskans have about the world often comes as a surprise to those from the coasts," O'Donnell notes.

As modern communications increasingly connect the world, "it will become more and more important for Nebraska to communicate and offer what we have worldwide," Gerlach says. "It's really important that we have our minds open to whatever so that we can share the amazing things that we do in Nebraska with whoever might need that."

Myers, the law student who was in the first cohort of Yeutter student fellows, says he's impressed in seeing how the Yeutter program has developed and created opportunities for students.

“It’s blossomed,” he says, “into something really special.”

A key part of that mission, O’Donnell says, stems from Yeutter’s emphasis on the need for students to understand that times change and decision-makers need to have critical thinking skills to adapt to new conditions, O’Donnell notes.

“With that in mind,” she says, “we try to create opportunities for students to develop that kind of thinking and adaptability. It’s the skill of learning we hone throughout their time in the program. It’s very important for students to bring fresh and critical thinking to all the fundamental questions that are being asked about trade right now.”

Opinions expressed are solely those of the author and not the Yeutter Institute or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.