

# SOWING, SUSTAINING, SERVING

## Central America

**S**owing. Sustaining. Serving. These three words mean much more than one would think. Planting “seeds,” strengthening the existence of knowledge, and helping people give food to others is what the SOWER Scholar Program strives to accomplish.

The acronym, SOWER, stands for Sustaining Our World through Education and Research. The International Center for Food Industry Excellence (ICFIE) introduced the SOWER Scholar Program in the spring of 2013. ICFIE is a collaborative center at Texas Tech University that is comprised of faculty members from Tech’s College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and the College of Human Sciences.

Mindy Brashears, the director of ICFIE and a professor of food safety and public health, said faculty members wanted the name, SOWER, to capture the spirit of the work they are completing.

“The students are our ‘seeds’, and we give them as much knowledge as we can in the amount of time we have with them,” Brashears said. “Then they return to their home countries and teach their co-workers or families what they have learned, and the seed eventually ‘harvests’.”

Brashears said there is a huge need for food safety, value-added processing, nutrition and outreach education in Central America, and that is exactly what ICFIE was designed for.

“All of the slaughter plants that need to be brought up to USDA standards do not export and

do not provide food to supermarkets or restaurants. The technology is there, they just need the right educational resources to get to the people,” Brashears said. “For example, how to wash your hands properly, how to cut carcasses, and how to utilize the materials they have to grow their animals and their crops.”

With the SOWER Scholar Program, students from Central America come to Tech for a time frame of six weeks to two months. They spend their time touring harvesting facilities and learning new methods, as well as learning American culture.

Not only do international students come to Lubbock, but Tech students also travel internationally with the faculty team. Their goal is to help teach facility, employees, and government health inspectors the proper techniques, from basic sanitation methods to the handling of meat, that way more slaughter plants can be approved for export into the United States.

“We take a selective group of students, and they help us with teaching, but it is really an eye-opening experience for them as well,” Brashears said. “We can teach our students all there is to know in a classroom, but we don’t impact their hearts until they take what they have learned and use it for good service.”

Graysen Ortega, a Lubbock native and senior food science major at Tech, said it was truly an eye-opening experience for him because he knows America has the safest food supply in the world. We have cutting-edge advances in technology that enables us use to make

our food safer. In Central America, aren't afforded the opportunity to have such advances or the education to understand them.

"People don't understand American technology advances and most other places don't have the capacity to do anything," Ortega said. "Food-borne-illness is one of the leading causes of death to children, and we will never be able to eliminate all of it, but we can go in there and make a difference."

Learning the different cultures is also part of what Brashears, her team and the students have an opportunity to do.

"We need to learn about their culture and beliefs so we can appreciate it, respect it, and take what we know and work within their system," Brashears said, "otherwise there is no long term change."

Henry Ruiz, a graduate student and employee at Raider Red Meats, has been on approximately 15 trips with the program since before it started in 2009.

"When I went on my first trip with the ICFIE team, I did not quite know what I was getting into," Ruiz said. "I was still an undergrad - the only undergrad - and it was a little intimidating going into these facilities that needed training."

Ruiz said on these trips, they usually work with beef and pork. Some of the facilities in Central America they visit, the facility will slaughter 50 to 60 head of beef cattle a day, but then in the afternoon they will slaughter approximately 300 hogs.

"This may seem like a large amount to most people, but in reality, at a slaughter plant in the U.S. they can go through about 20,000 hog carcasses a day," Ruiz said.


*"We are doing something really great here to feed the world and provide the world with safe abundant food."*

The program is growing so significantly that discussions have been initiated to implement additional agreements with Earth University in Limon, Costa Rica, the University of

Veracruz in Xalapa, Mexico, the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, and the University of Yucatan in Merida, Mexico.

"This program is so much more than we ever thought it would be," Brashears said. "We are the only University in the United States that has this program, and we are making changes everyday."

Brashears said ICFIE hopes to be a premier-endowed program in Central America, the Caribbean, and the United States within the next 10 to 15 years.

"We want people to see what we are doing and realize we are doing something really great here to feed the world and provide the world with safe, abundant food." 

*Brandyl Brooks*  
Lampasas, Texas



Photo courtesy of Graysen Ortega



Photo courtesy of Alejandro Echeverry



SOWER Scholar Students and their advisers in Central America visit various meat packing plants to implement educational programs.