

Creating Synergy



In northern California, a community that depended on natural resources and the land surrounded Ryan Williams, Ph.D. He said he grew up watching environmentalists, who didn't think things that grow naturally on the land, should be used for anything else.

Because of this, Williams said he understood the environmentalist side of wanting to preserve the natural environment and the things that potentially provide economic benefit to us as a society. However, he knew that was not plausible at the cost of economic activity.

As Williams attended Emory University in Georgia, he chose to take an economics course to fulfill a degree requirement.

"I left that class thinking, 'this is a solution. This is a skillset that can solve the world's problems as it relates to the land use, resource use types of problems,'" Williams said.

Receiving his doctorate from Texas Tech University, he now serves as a professor for the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics. Along with teaching two classes a semester, Williams also mentors graduate students as well as conducts research.

Recently, Williams received a grant to establish an experimental economics lab to be named The Food and Resource Experimental Economics Laboratory at Texas Tech. The lab will be located in the basement of the Agricultural Sciences building, and will be a mobile lab. It will consist of tablets and laptops with a server that has a wireless port.

"Being able to take it out in the field and conduct experiments off campus expands our capability,"

Williams said.

Most agriculture colleges in the country are land-grant institutions, which provide research, education, and outreach primarily to the agricultural community, but more generally to society. However, Texas Tech is not a land-grant institution.

"Largely from a research prospective, we are somewhat at a disadvantage here at Texas Tech compared to the land-grant institutions," said Williams.

The National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is a USDA funding agency that has a dedicated annual funding line available geared towards non land-grant

colleges of agriculture. NIFA tries to help these colleges of agriculture be competitive in the research domain. Williams said they offer a capacity building program for non land-grant colleges of agriculture.

"This funding is meant to help make us competitive by building infrastructure or

opportunities that enhance our capabilities out into the future," Williams said.

He said he hopes other faculty in the agriculture college will take advantage of the opportunity.

"Largely, it'd be great if someone in food science that is looking at the characteristics of beef that people prefer, participate in an experiment where they cooked a bunch of different meat for the taste test," Williams said. "All you've done is looked at the physical characteristics and how people prefer them. You haven't looked at the economic condition under which they would prefer those things. So the price difference might matter."

Williams said it is important to add that extra layer in there, and the experimental lab is an opportunity to expand

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that information.

The department of Animal and Food Sciences at Texas Tech does consumer panels that try to measure what a consumer thinks, tastes, and the differences in what they are fed.

Mark Miller, Ph.D., a professor in the department of Animal and Food Sciences, said in some consumer panels they try to figure out what the impact of a brand is, or a concept such as organic or natural.

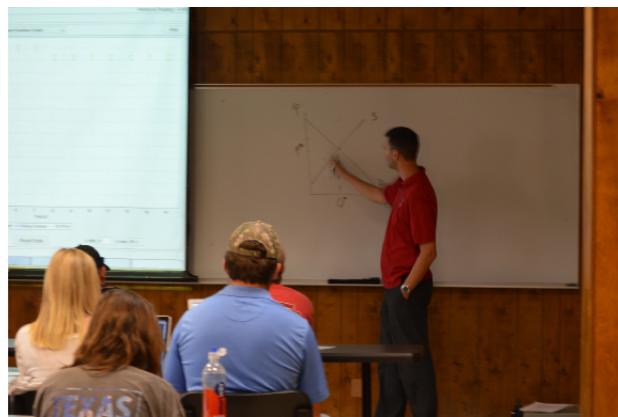
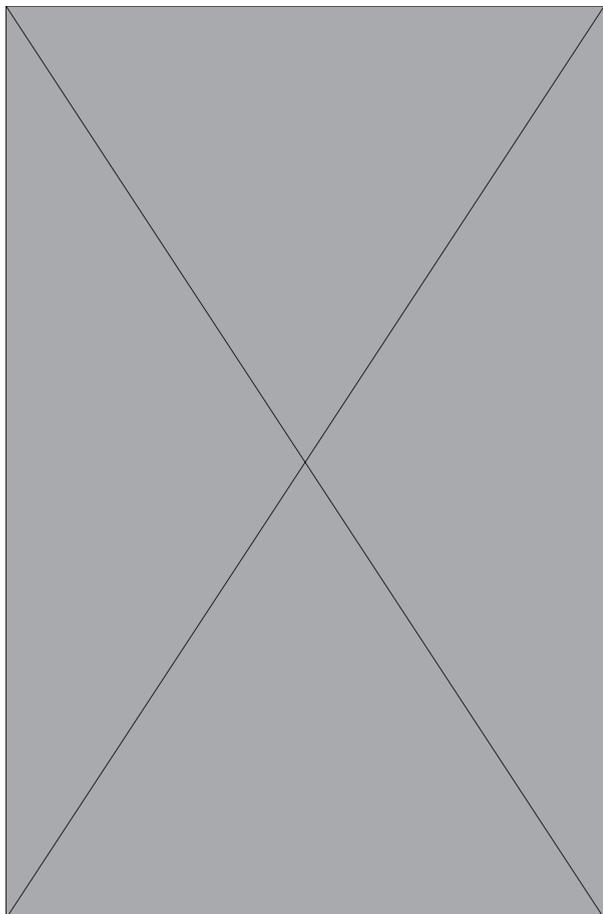
“We have also conducted studies where we feed consumers telling them this is organic beef, this is hormone fed beef, this is grain fed, this is grass fed, just a wide range of things,” Miller said. “And we fed them where it was true, that is what it is, and we fed them where it’s not true, the same consumer, and found out the impact, or the power, of just them thinking that it’s something that it’s not.”

He said they try to tie it into a value by asking consumers how much they are willing to pay.

Miller said it is important to remember that there is hunger, food insecurity, and starvation in the world. He said everything that is done with a consumer would tie to economics because the driver for a lot of purchase decisions is the price and the economics of what people can afford.

“When we start talking about how what we are doing can tie with the economics lab, that’s exactly where it ties in,” Miller said.

Williams’ idea of the lab is to enhance faculty capability, student capability, and educational capability



Ryan Williams walking students through an experiment

by using the lab to help teach. He said, in addition to CASNR there are economists in the business school and other faculty in the business school who would run similar types of experiments that could take advantage of the lab.

“It really should be the case that this can become a synergy generating opportunity,” Williams said.

Holton Westbrook, student body president and dual degree student in Agricultural Economics and Business, said, from his experience in taking classes in both the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, as well as the Rawls College of Business, he can already see that their partnership is important not only to his education, but also to the growth of the university. He said as a university, they are trying to collaborate in ways that were never done before in order to take what Texas Tech currently has, and make it to the next level.

“Ways that we are looking to take research to the next level with this lab is to ensure that the partnership and relationship through Rawls College of Business and the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics are able to collaborate on different issues and different concerns,” said Westbrook.

He said knowing that the university is moving forward in research, being able to collaborate in these two different departments is crucial.

The Food and Resource Experimental Economics Laboratory at Texas Tech has the potential of taking the research disadvantage that Williams sees at the university, and enhancing learning capabilities throughout campus.

“As a student, that’s something that we can take pride in and use and see in our degree, and how that degree means that much more because our research is meaning that much more to this university,” Westbrook said. 



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