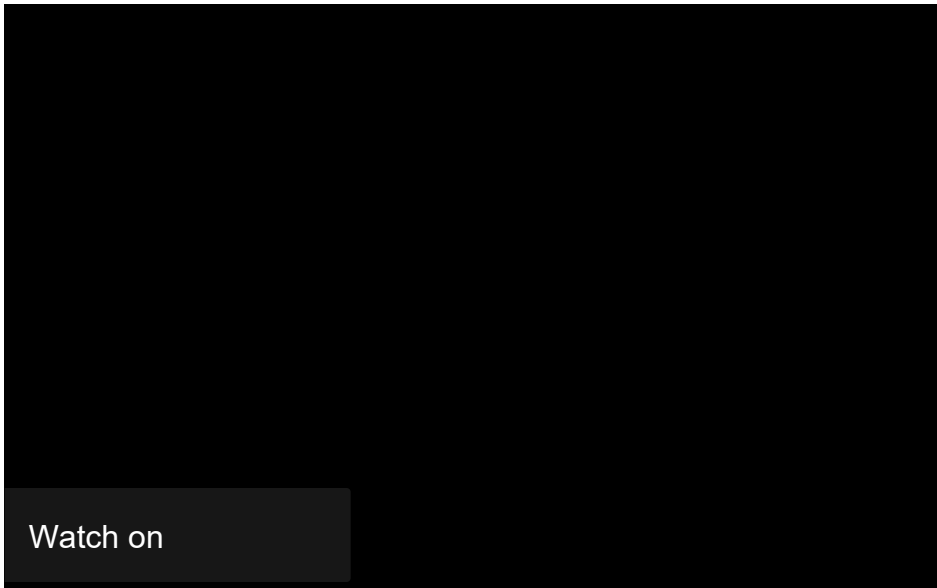


Swapping Classrooms for Cow Barns

UNH CREAM program offers dairy management training — and so much more

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It's a Tuesday evening on the University of New Hampshire campus in Durham, and a group of 25 students who are part of the university's [Cooperative for Real Education in Agricultural Management](#) (CREAM) program have gathered in the conference room at the [Fairchild Dairy Teaching and Research Center](#).

In the student-led, two-semester CREAM course, students gain hands-on experience caring for dairy cows and managing and participating in everything from herd health to dairy production to in-class education. Each week, CREAM students work six-plus hours at the Fairchild farm, milking, feeding, cleaning and

changing the bedding of the 25 black-and-white Holsteins in their care. The weekly shifts are paired with four hours of classroom time, during which the students serve on committees and subcommittees charged with overseeing every aspect of the dairy business. Every six weeks, members switch to new committees, serving in new roles and working with different class members.

Tonight, the Production Management Committee members are talking about the health of each cow — who recently calved, who’s been showing signs of stress, who’s producing plenty of milk and who’s producing a less than average amount. The Finance Committee is discussing when the hoof trimmer will arrive next and the cost of her services. Farm Facilities and Maintenance members are meeting with [Jon Whitehouse](#), manager of the Fairchild farm, to talk about new projects, and the Education and Planning Committee is brainstorming topics and guest speakers for the weekly Thursday night meetings.

“This program is as much about learning how to communicate and lead teams and come to a democratic consensus as it is about how to care for dairy cows and manage a dairy operation,” says [Drew Conroy](#), coordinator of the Applied Animal Science program and a professor in the department of agriculture, nutrition and food systems at UNH. “They’re learning many of the skills employers want:



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how to lead, how to delegate, how to show initiative and how to work together.”

For the 25-year-history of CREAM, Conroy has been involved in running the program and working with the students. He helped get it going when it was launched by the late Thomas Fairchild '59 (for whom UNH's conventional dairy farm is named), and when Fairchild retired, Conroy started overseeing the program.

Most students in CREAM aren't preparing to work on dairy farms, Conroy says.

Many are pre-veterinary majors gaining large-animal experience; others have farming backgrounds and want to learn the management and business side. Regardless of why they're there, though, CREAM students are gaining invaluable interpersonal skills and training.

“Overwhelmingly, alumni have said that the active learning in CREAM was an effective teaching strategy and that the course had a direct impact on their career trajectories,” Conroy says.

[Dr. Liz Brock '01](#), a veterinarian and a clinical assistant professor with the department of agriculture, nutrition and food systems, took part in the second year of CREAM (1998-1999). A pre-veterinary major at the time, she enrolled in CREAM after hearing

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a presentation in one of her freshman-year math courses. It was her first time working with cows and one of the most impactful hands-on learning experiences of her undergraduate education.

“The obvious thing that CREAM teaches is how a dairy farm functions,” says Brock. “Beyond that, it teaches so many life skills about communication between colleagues, about conflict resolution, about responsibility — realizing that nobody is going to be there to milk the cows unless you get up at 4:30 in the morning. You gain a real respect for animals and the role that they play in our lives.”

Back in the classroom on Tuesday, Conroy talks about one of his favorite words, especially when describing

CREAM: “Initiative.” The word is printed on a hat he wears and carved into a wood cutout that he keeps in his office. He says it’s the number one thing that he wants CREAM students to show — both to him and to their fellow classmates.

“I want them to personally take risk and responsibility and step up when things need to be done or fixed — and they do,” he says.

“That is why, over the years, CREAM has gotten this reputation as a program that really sets graduates apart.”

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