

# **Training a New Generation of Leaders in International Agricultural Trade and Development**

Project Director: Andrew Muhammad, Ph.D.

Co-Director: Tom Gill, Ph.D.

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## **Project Summary**

Agriculture plays an important role in international diplomacy due to pressing issues affecting food systems, food security, and international trade. This is evidenced by the activities of federal agencies to develop foreign markets for American farmers, as well as providing food and agricultural development assistance to low-income countries. These activities shape how the U.S. government engages foreign countries and how USDA and USAID implement international programs.

Graduate training is needed to prepare a new generation of leaders for the international agricultural arena. This National Needs Fellowship (NNF) proposal is designed to support six master's students in International Trade and Development from fall 2023 to summer 2025. This training will develop Fellows' analytical and leadership skills through classroom instruction, a Special International Study in Southeast Asia (Cambodia and Vietnam), international thesis research, and professional development to address a critical employment shortfall and need for USDA, i.e., the need from more individuals equipped with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to advance global opportunities for American agriculture.

This project also seeks to expand and diversify the pool of qualified candidates for federal employment by recruiting fellows from underrepresented groups and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). The proposed training program is designed to meet the Targeted Expertise Shortage Area (TESA) Agricultural Management and Economics and addresses two relevant disciplines for this NNF funding cycle: M. Agricultural Marketing and Management and I. International Agriculture. This fellowship program will establish the foundation for a new M.S. program at UTIA to train future cohorts in these areas of critical need.

## **1. Recruitment (September 2022 – July 2023)**

The Fellows program prioritized the recruitment of students from historically underserved groups that meet the qualifications for acceptance into the graduate program. Students were recruited through the following efforts: i) On-campus recruitment through UTK and UTIA undergraduate programs, the UTK Graduate School, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) units; ii) Promotion and recruitment at MSIs, including those providing evidence of direct support of the project (Tennessee State University and Tuskegee University - See Letters of Support); and iii) Promotion and through the regional and national Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS). Dr. Prabodh Illukpitiya and Dr. Sam

Nahashon with Tennessee State University and Dr. Conrad Bonsi with Tuskegee University provided support letters committing to serving as feeder institutions for the training program and committed faculty to serve as external committee members on graduate theses.

In addition to these activities, we also recruited through the Committed on the Status of Blacks in Agricultural Economics (COSBAE), which was established in 1980 for the purpose of promoting the welfare of Black agricultural economists by representing their interests and by engaging in activities that encourage their professional advancement. We also recruited through the Advisory Board of the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Ranchers Policy Research Center (SDFR), which includes leaders from 1890 Universities, including the executive director for the Association of 1890 Research Directors.

Based on recruitment efforts we were able to accept 7 students into the program. Note that two students come with funding which allowed for accepting up to 8 students. The student bios are listed below. Four students are in the M.S. program in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications (ALEC) and three are in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics (AREC).

**Kortni Blalock (AREC)** is a first year M.S. student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville majoring in Agricultural and Resource Economics. She obtained her BS degree from North Carolina A&T. Originally from Conyers, Georgia, she began working for USDA-FAS in the summer of 2022 as a part of the USDA 1890 National Scholar program, where she was an intern in the Trade and Economic Analysis Division. In December 2022, she was selected by Howard University to be a part of the first cohort of the FAS International Agricultural Fellowship. The fellowship includes development opportunities and mentorship for her during her internships and graduate semesters. Her goal is to continue strengthening her research skills throughout graduate school and enter the FAS Foreign Service where she can continue her passion for global food security, international trade, and policies that help feed the world.

**Michelle Boutell (ALEC)** is pursuing a career that promotes food system resiliency through informed leadership and accessible education. She holds a B.S. in International Agricultural Development with a minor in South Asian studies from the University of California at Davis. During her time at Davis, she worked for the USAID Horticulture Innovation Lab, and saw how impactful access to agricultural information and technologies could be for project partners. Michelle also has experience working with Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization in the faith-based non-profit sector and has been responsible for teaching translator-facilitated postharvest workshops, writing scientific communications, and handling cross-cultural business negotiations.

**Caroline Brooks (ALEC)** has a background in agriculture, leadership, business, and communications. She has held multiple internships, including a communications internship at the Tennessee Beef Industry Council, a customer experience internship at Farm Credit Mid-America, and a workforce preparation-focused student employee position in the Tennessee State 4-H office. She has also served as a Collegiate Facilitator representing the UTK Collegiate 4-H and FFA Club at the National 4-H Summit on Healthy Living in 2020 and 2022. Caroline holds a

B.S. in Agriculture Communications with a minor in Food and Agriculture Business from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

**Natalie Crisci (AREC)** is a first-year graduate student pursuing an MS in Natural Resource Economics at the University of Tennessee in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics. Her studies in Natural Resource Economics are paired with a focus in International Trade and Development as a part of the USDA National Needs Fellowship. She completed her undergraduate degree in Civil Engineering as a student in the Honors College at the University of Alabama with a concentration in Water Resources and Environmental Engineering, along with minor studies in Italian: Language and Culture. Throughout her undergraduate studies, she was a member of the Randall Research Scholars Program which enabled her to take part in a variety of research projects in collaboration with exceptional faculty members. Those research opportunities allowed her to explore her academic interests ranging from transportation engineering to environmental engineering, and on to the broader impacts of modern agricultural practices on water resources. She joins the UTK AREC program excited to delve into the economics of water resources and agriculture, along with the global implications of economic policy.

**Hannah Donahue (AREC)** grew up in Jonesborough, Tennessee and is a first-year graduate student at the University of Tennessee, pursuing my master's degree in Natural Resource Economics. She completed her bachelor's degree in Natural Resource and Environmental Economics with a minor in Economics from the University of Tennessee in May of 2023. During her undergraduate career, she worked on projects concerning local food insecurity and food access in Knoxville, TN. Her research interests include food security, natural resource management, and how food and water systems can adapt to climate change. She is ultimately interested in approaching these complex issues from a policy perspective. She believes that the National Needs Fellowship in International Trade and Development will allow me to gain a broader perspective on how these issues interact on a global scale.

**Ana Maria Greenberger (ALEC)** is a first-generation Mexican American seeking to better understand the agrifood system on a national and global level. She has worked and lived in Israel, completed USAID Farmer-to-Farmer assignments in Cambodia, and currently works for a farmer-supported non-profit organization in Appalachia. She is particularly passionate about food and nutrition security, and how she can contribute as a leader and educator for positive community development. Ana holds a B.S. in Community, Environment and Development with a concentration in International Development and a minor in International Agriculture from the Pennsylvania State University.

**Makenzie Smith (ALEC)** is a first-generation college student with an agricultural communications, business and policy background. She has served under US Congresswoman Kat Cammack addressing issues of public policy and crisis management communication. Her background in agriculture extends from private industry in produce packing and shipping to academia and government with the University of Georgia and the USDA in peanut research. Makenzie holds a B.S. in Agriculture Communications with an Agribusiness minor from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.



**Figure 1.** Co-PI Tom Gill (far left) and PI Andrew Muhammad (far right) pictured with the 7 NNF Fellows. NNF Fellows from left to right: Kortni Blalock, Caroline Brooks, Natalie Crisci, Hannah Donahue, Michelle Boutell, Ana Maria Greenberger, and Makenzie Smith

Note: NNF Project: Training a New Generation of Leaders in International Agricultural Trade and Development. Grants.gov Tracking Number: GRANT13590822; Proposal Number: 2022-04931.

## 2. NNF Kick-Off Meeting

September 8, 2023, we had a kick-off/welcome meeting to discuss the details of the National Needs Fellows program, including expectations, the Southeast Asia trip, and the schedule ahead. This meeting also included a luncheon attended by the Fellow, Project Directors Gill and Muhammad, Thesis Advisors, the Dean and Associate Dean of the Herbert College of Agriculture, and the Department Heads for ALEC and AREC.

At this meeting the meeting were informed about the program and asked extensive questions about expectations that included the following:

### *Overview of Expected Academic Training*

We discussed the required M.S. courses for Agricultural Economics (AREC) or Agricultural Education (ALEC) programs. Cohort courses and Special Electives, which include specialized courses in international agricultural diplomacy: policy, international trade, development, and extension, and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

### *International These Research*

The Fellows all have thesis advisors, and their thesis projects will focus on a global agricultural issue, including international trade, natural resources, or development/extension in a foreign country context.

### *Special International Study (SIS)*

We discussed the two-week study abroad in Southeast Asia, providing contextual understanding of international trade (Vietnam) and extension/development (Cambodia). Details are given later in this report.

### *Professional Development and Leadership*

Fellows will participate in the Executive Seminar Series (Fall 2024), shadow faculty mentors, and organize a special conference session (for Southern Region Ag Econ/Ag Ed Conference in February 2025).

### *Mentorship and pipelining*

PIs and advising committees will mentor Fellows. Fellows will participate in academic conferences and professional exchanges that will expand their networks and help plan a career path.

### *DEI Training*

Fellows will participate in DEI training and gain cross-cultural skills through SIS, international research, and foreign language coursework. Many of these activities will be through the University's DEI program. Students will be expected to write a summary paper of all DEI training and related activities.



**Figure 2.** NNF Fellows Kick-Off Meeting, September 8, 2023.

### 3. Academic Training and Cohort Courses

In addition to the core courses for incoming graduate students (Fall 2023), all NNF students registered to take ALEC 585 *Global Sustainable Development Goals*. The course addresses the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted in 2015 to provide a framework and direction for all countries of the world towards 17 common global goals. The SDGs are goals towards which our global society has agreed and outline high-level targets in all spheres of human interaction with each other and the planet. This course provides a transdisciplinary introduction and assessment of these global SDGs. The course presents each of the SDGs, looks at global progress towards each SDG, and provides opportunities for students to explore the synergies of the SDGs. While emphasis is placed on the global nature of the SDGs, this course provides students with the opportunities to reflect on these goals and participate in multidisciplinary teams to develop action plans for addressing multiple SDGs as individuals and for the University of Tennessee community.

We believed that it was important that the student take a cohort course as soon as possible to build camaraderie, especially given the Special International Study (SIS) scheduled for January 4-18, 2024.

### 4. Special International Study (SIS)

The Special International Study (SIS) is scheduled for January 4–18, 2024. This two-week study abroad in Southeast Asia, providing contextual understanding of international extension and development (Cambodia) and international trade (Vietnam). In addition to the Fellows and Project Directors, staff from the Smith Center for International Sustainable Agriculture (Smith Center) are also attending the SIS to assist with logistic and to provide student support during the trip. Smith Center Support Staff participating in the SIS: Mary Shelley-Snell (left) who is the Smith Center's Global Communications Leader, and Morgan Leigh Owens (right), who is the Smith Center's F2F Program Manager.





### Southeast Asia Special International Study Draft Itinerary

Date	Agenda
Jan 4, Thursday	Travel to Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Jan 5, Friday	Arrive in Phnom Penh
Jan 6, Saturday	Rest/ cultural day
Jan 7, Sunday	Cultural day / orientation / travel to Kampot
Jan 8, Monday	Kampot/Kep
Jan 9, Tuesday	Kampot/Kep and return to Phnom Penh
Jan 10, Wednesday	Travel to Siem Reap via Kampong Cham
Jan 11, Thursday	Siem Reap
Jan 12, Friday	ATP/School Tech Park
Jan 13, Saturday	Temple Day
Jan 14, Sunday	Fly to Ho Chi Minh (AM); free afternoon
Jan 15, Monday	Ho Chi Minh
Jan 16, Tuesday	Ho Chi Minh
Jan 17, Wednesday	Ho Chi Minh
Jan 18, Thursday	depart; arrive back in US

### Vietnam leg of Special International Study

#### Jan 14-18, 2024 (Draft Agenda)

Date	Content
<b>Jan 14</b>	University Tennessee arrival Tan Son Nhat Airport
<b>Jan 15</b>	
9:00-10:00	USDA briefing on Agriculture Trade Opportunity in Vietnam
10:15	Depart for Port visit
11:00-12:00	Port visit
12:15-13:30	Lunch
14:00-15:00	Cotton Council
15:15	Depart for a spinning facility that exports
16:00-17:00	Spining facility visit
17:15	Return Hotel & Rest
<b>Jan 16</b>	

8:00-9:30	HAWA
9:45	Depart for Ho Nai Furniture (a wood products (e.g., furniture) manufacturers and exporters in Dong Nai Province)
11:00-12:00	Ho Nai Furniture visit
12:15-13:30	Lunch
14:00-15:00	Another Wood Importer visit
15:15	Return Hotel & Rest
<b>Jan 17</b>	<b>Mekong Delta Tour</b>
8:00-9:00	Meeting a Seafood Importer
9:15	Depart for Mekong Delta
10:45-12:00	Fish Farm visit in Tien Giang
12:15-13:30	Lunch
14:00-15:00	Cold Chain visit
16:00-17:00	Vietnam Logistic Institute
17:15	Return Hotel & Rest
<b>Jan 18</b>	<b>Depart US</b>

## 5. Budget and Expenses

As of September 30, 2023. Total expenses have included Fellowship payments to 6 students for 1.2 months and plane tickets for 6 Fellows to travel to Cambodia and Vietnam.