



Students join with community members to attend Nobel Conference

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group of conference attendees outside in front of tree

Curiosity can bring people together in unusual and unexpected ways—like two busses from the Appleton area filled with local high school and college students; teachers and faculty; and adult community members all headed to St. Peter, Minnesota, for an intergenerational learning experience officially authorized by The Nobel Foundation.

Associate Professor Jamie Douglas, and some of her students from UW-Fox Valley, a UW Oshkosh Campus, were among the lively minds on their way to the early October conference at Gustavus Adolphus College, a school with deep Swedish heritage that earned the first in the world and the only U.S. formal lecture series tied to the Nobel Foundation in Stockholm.

Douglas teaches a class connected to the Nobel Conference and like the conference, the UW-Fox Valley course topic changes annually, although always emphasizing science and ethics. "Living Soil: A Universe Underfoot" was the 2018 focus of the 54th annual Nobel Conference. Participants were invited to consider the diversity and complexity of soil, and the challenges of protecting this fundamental resource.

Multifaceted Soil

The emphasis on soil grabbed the attention of Douglas, who earned her Ph.D. in civil engineering but has a deep background in geosciences, and has previously taught geology. "The topic area of soil has been an interest for me," she said of choosing to teach the Nobel Conference-focused class at UW-Fox Valley. "The goal of the course is to go along with the conference and take an interdisciplinary look at the topic: physical, geological, biological, chemical, as well as its use in food production and agriculture, the conservation movement, and how it is used in language, poetry and art."

The annual content change of the course drew UW-Fox Valley student Maggie DeGrave to twice take the class, which included conference attendance. Last year's topic of reproductive technologies was fascinating for her, but this year's focus on soil had both mental and emotional pull. "I grew up and live in the country," DeGrave said. "Soil has always been part of my life—I played in mud and watched farmers."

Both Douglas and DeGrave found the conference invigorating.

"I was shocked by how much agriculture was talked about in the conference," said DeGrave, who is completing an associate's degree and planning to continue her education at UW-Platteville. She believes what she learned will affect how she and her family steward the land they own and rent to crop farmers. "The conference delved into agricultural practices and it is really awesome to take that home to apply to my life and how my family manages our land. Before class, my definition of soil was 'dirt plants grow in'. Now, I know it is so many more components, an organic and inorganic blend to make a fertile place for plants and animals to grow."

Conference Community

Douglas appreciated the conference's unusual format that ensured attendees could listen to every presentation without having to pick and choose. "We were all in an arena together, so we felt close to the people talking, and they were very passionate," she said. "We would have a couple of speeches and then all seven would be on stage for a panel discussion."

Lunches provided opportunities to gather and talk with other people, including urban farmers, retirees interested in sustainability and community outreach workers. DeGrave enjoyed connecting with students from other universities, especially students and professors from Lawrence University in Appleton. Douglas met a Fox Valley farmer and expects to continue conversing about ways to use farm data, and has invited an instructor from Lawrence to present to the UW-Fox Valley women in science group.

The UW-Fox Valley campus involvement in the Nobel Conference goes back a decade through team taught interdisciplinary courses initially offered in sustainability noted UW Oshkosh Assistant Chancellor for Access Campuses Martin Rudd. "Recognizing that the annual conference themes also extend an opportunity to create a course for students and members of the public to share in an uncovering of the issues that will be discussed in Minnesota, we have created a wealth of teaching materials since we entered this partnership through the Community Foundation of the Fox Valley Region. I have attended twice and from what I hear from the faculty and students and community members who go, the conferences seem to keep getting better!"

Two local foundations make conference attendance possible for UW-Fox Valley and other students, Rudd said. The [EMMA Nobel Education Fund of the Appleton Education Foundation](#) provides full scholarships for high school and college students and educators from the Fox Cities, Shawano and Two Harbors, Minnesota. Community members pay their own way, but the foundation facilitates registration and transportation. Additional funding support comes from the [Mielke Family Foundation of the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region, Inc.](#), which seeks to encourage big ideas to improve education.

Photos courtesy of Jamie Douglas

Top Photo: Attendees at the Nobel Conference from UW-Fox Valley were (left to right): Brittney Natrop, Maggie DeGrave, Professor Jamie Douglas, Karma Brooks, Gaby Barcenas

Bottom Photo: A view of one of the sessions at the 2018 Nobel Conference

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Tweets by @uwoshkosh

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