



Returning *to the* Ranch

A revamped range curriculum at South Dakota State University helps students prepare to do just that.

Story and photo by
KINDRA GORDON

Many ranchers can attest that they've learned their life lessons through the school of hard knocks. Now, a new curriculum at South Dakota State University (SDSU) is designed to help future ranchers hit the ground running.

"We wanted to offer a program for our students who were planning to go back to the ranch," says Pat Johnson, SDSU professor of range science.

"We recognize that if you're going to manage a ranch, you need dif-

ferent skills than if you're going to work for an agency like the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)," Barry Dunn adds. Dunn has 20 years of experience as a South Dakota rancher and is now a professor in the animal and range science department at SDSU.

Two years ago, curriculum emphasizing range livestock production was created within the university's range science major. The coursework for the program is a blend of range science, animal science and business classes. The new curriculum was developed with input from a team of university professors, re-

searchers, Extension specialists and ranchers.

Setting the foundation

Range science is at the core of the curriculum because of the crucial role it plays in the success of a ranch. "When you go back to the ranch and have grasslands to deal with, grazing becomes one of the most important things to understand and manage," Johnson says.

With that foundation, the program uses an integrated approach to bring the elements of business management, grazing and livestock production together. Based on input

from seasoned ranchers in the state, the program also devotes time to learning how to analyze records, as well as to understanding human behavior and working with family.

This combination is designed to give students returning to the farm or ranch a solid education in managing rangeland from a rancher's perspective. "We want our graduates to have practical experience in understanding all of the elements of ranching," Johnson says.

To that end, one of the initial courses for freshman and sophomore students enrolled in the program is designed to offer an overview of ranch management. "From the start, we want to sensitize students to the breadth and depth of information they'll need to be a successful ranch manager," Dunn says.

"Our goal is to help students look at a ranch holistically and realize that it includes people, communities, natural resources and finances, in addition to the livestock," he adds.

In the introductory class, students work as a team to develop ranch plans, conduct resource inventories and set ranch goals. By their senior year, SDSU students formulate their own ranch plans in the advanced ranch management course, which focuses on in-depth business analysis. Dunn says the goal of this final course is to assist these future ranchers in developing a plan to help make their hopes and dreams come true.

Not surprisingly, the feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive. Dunn says the most frequent comment students make after completing the introductory course is: "I didn't realize there was so much to it."

"And, why would they?" he asks. "Most of them are 18 years old, and their folks have never shared a balance sheet with them. Our goal is to expose them to all of the elements required to manage a successful ranch."

Johnson and Dunn report that several students are taking courses in the new "back to the ranch" curriculum, and there has been a noticeable increase in the number of incoming freshmen enrolling in the range livestock production program.

Johnson adds that the success of their newly revamped program is also due to the support they have received from other departments at SDSU. "The animal science and wildlife professors were very supportive of our efforts to redesign the range curriculum. We all want to help students take courses that suit their career needs," she says.

While the SDSU range science program isn't patterned specifically after any other university, Johnson says Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota and Texas also offer similar programs designed to help students get ready to manage a ranch.