

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS & RURAL SOCIOLOGY



November 24, 2014

Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
Auburn University
202 Comer Hall
Auburn, AL 36849

Dear Professor Bailey and Members of the Search Committee:

Please consider this application and accompanying materials for the position of Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology in the Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Department at Auburn University. Upon completion of my Ph.D. last year, I began a postdoctoral fellowship in your department where I have led an investigation of southeastern consumers' beliefs and attitudes about local beef. I believe my scholarship and research interests have given me a strong foundation to successfully build upon and expand the strengths of the department in the following ways. First, as an interdisciplinary social scientist my research is focused on the human and social dimensions of environmental sustainability issues within the realm of food and agricultural systems and land use issues. Second, I ground my work theoretically and methodologically within an interdisciplinary social science framework and draw on literatures from the fields of environmental sociology, natural resource management, the sociology of food and agriculture, and agricultural economics. Third, I approach research questions from a problem-oriented perspective; i.e., I frame research questions with the aim of addressing specific environmental sustainability problems. These aspects of my scholarship, along with my experience using quantitative and qualitative methodologies, leave me well positioned to collaborate within the department and across disciplines as I work to develop a nationally-recognized research program that furthers the department's efforts promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development.

Current Scholarship: In my current work I am leading an investigation of southeastern consumers' beliefs and attitudes about local beef. This project is part of a larger study about food safety and security regarding the production and distribution of local foods and is supported by the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) competitive grant program of the USDA. One objective of this study is to identify the meanings, salient beliefs, and attitudes consumers associate with the purchase of local beef. A second objective is to explore the ways consumers' beliefs about local beef shift in the context of a food safety event. A special emphasis has also been placed on including consumers from low-income, minority, and rural communities, as they are frequently left out of studies about local foods. This investigation relies on a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods and I spent the last year conducting formative research that will be used to develop a regional phone-survey instrument. During this time, I have supervised and mentored five undergraduate student research assistants. Over the summer, we conducted 275 face-to-face interviews at eight farmers markets and 18 Piggly Wiggly's across Alabama where we posed open and closed-ended questions to beef consumers.

Recently I have presented outcomes from this study at the Rural Sociological Society Annual Conference and a special meeting about global food security hosted by the American Society of Animal Sciences. Four papers documenting the findings from this formative research are in preparation:

- The first paper explores consumer familiarity with and perceptions of the term *local beef*. This paper will rely on data collected from consumers in low-income, mostly non-white, rural communities and will be submitted to *Meat Science*
- The second paper compares consumer familiarity with and perceptions of the term local beef across the two populations – farmers markets and rural grocery store consumers. This article will be submitted to the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*.
- The third paper uses the reasoned action approach to identify the salient beliefs consumers in low-income, mostly non-white, rural communities have about purchasing local beef products and will be submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values*.
- The fourth paper compares beliefs about local beef between farmers market and grocery store consumers and will be submitted to *Appetite*.

Dissertation Project: I completed my dissertation in environmental studies with a concentration in the social sciences at the University of Colorado-Boulder in December 2013. My dissertation project examined land-use preferences for protected agricultural lands. I integrated methodologies, theory, and current knowledge from the fields of environmental sociology, agricultural economics, and natural resource management to address a practical environmental policy conflict about sustainable agriculture, land use policy, and farmland protection at the urban-rural divide. Specifically, I used in-depth stakeholder interviews, a general population internet-survey, and a hedonic pricing model to identify the local community's general management preferences for protected farmlands. A primary finding from the study was that stakeholders have general concerns about the management of the agricultural lands once they have been protected and specific concerns about how the management plans for the protected lands are negotiated. The survey results indicate that many of the preferences individuals have for protected agricultural lands are not necessarily tied to active agriculture. Moreover, the hedonic pricing model showed that any premium homeowners receive from being proximate to protected agricultural lands comes from its protection status.

Throughout my work I have applied for and received funding from various sources. As a graduate student I was awarded two grants from the Graduate School: a Dissertation Completion Fellowship and the Beverly Sears Research Grant. As a member of the University of Colorado's Environmental Center I co-authored and was awarded a Sustainable CU Grant for the creation of a campus community garden project. My current work is supported by the AFRI and while not present for the drafting of the original grant, being a part of the project has provided opportunities to familiarize myself with this granting agency.

As further evidence of my promise as a scholar and my commitment to scholarly engagement, I have also been involved in additional projects as a research assistant at the Institute of Behavioral Science at CU-Boulder, an interdisciplinary academic institute. This work has resulted in a co-authored publication and two co-authored outreach reports. For the 2013 Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society conference, I organized a panel discussion about farmland protection scholarship. More recently I was invited to present findings from the local beef study to a graduate seminar at Auburn University's Department of Animal Science.

Teaching and Integrating Students into Research: Similarly, my effectiveness as a researcher translates to my success as a teacher and as my curriculum vitae lists, I have had opportunities to teach across disciplinary settings. As an educator, my primary goals are to facilitate critical thinking inside and outside of the

classroom and foster students' imaginative capacities. In the classroom I rely on multiple modes of instruction. When I asked introductory sociology students what aspects of my teaching helped them learn the most one student stated: *I really enjoyed how the different sources were integrated into class, i.e., textbook, movies, video clips, PowerPoint, and lecture...It takes a great instructor to keep the class's attention for 3 hours!* A detailed class observation report and course evaluations are available upon request.

My research and experience teaching have prepared me to teach courses your department currently offers including Food, Agriculture and Society and Society of Natural Resources and the Environment. Additionally, my experience using qualitative and quantitative research methods has prepared me to teach the Methods of Social Research course. I am also ready to develop courses to complement existing curriculum. For instance, a course on inequality and the environment could begin with a survey of the environmental justice movement and then proceed to examine how people and communities experience environmental degradation, and how the organization of society renders some people more vulnerable to environmental degradation than others. I am also committed to providing opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to training several students to conduct field research over the summer, an undergraduate honors student under my direction, will present a poster at the Professional Agricultural Workers Conference at Tuskegee University and contribute to a presentation for the upcoming Southern Rural Sociological Association meeting.

Thank you for your time and consideration. While I enjoy the work I am currently doing as a Fellow, I would welcome the opportunity to develop my academic career as an assistant professor in the department. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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