



Daniel G. Sisler

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Daniel G. Sisler—a Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor Emeritus and a Cornell trustee emeritus—is one in the pantheon of Cornell’s greatest teachers and mentors. Raised on a small farm in rural Wales Center NY (near Buffalo), he had first-hand exposure to the economics of the farm sector, but his success as a scholar and teacher in agricultural and development economics could hardly have been predicted in his youth. Indeed, because of his family’s timber operations, he matriculated at Purdue University (with a football scholarship) to pursue an education to be an industrial chemist specializing in wood adhesives.

His life and career took a major turn when, sensing that he was about to be drafted, Sisler took a leave of absence from Purdue and enlisted in the Air Force. He became a survival and rescue specialist, and this expertise led to his teaching survival techniques to aircraft crews. An explosion during a training mission in March 1954 left Sisler blind in both eyes. After many months of rehabilitation at a hospital near Chicago, he returned to Purdue. But, he thought that his disability would likely be a problem for a career in the physical sciences, and he turned his focus to agricultural economics. After obtaining a bachelor’s degree (1956), he completed a master’s degree in agricultural economics at Purdue in 1957.

Dan was admitted to the Ph.D. program in agricultural economics at Cornell, and did his doctoral research under the direction of Kenneth L. Robinson, a distinguished and respected student of agricultural policy. The resulting dissertation, titled “Direct Producer Payments in the Feed Grain-Livestock Sector of American Agriculture,” was recognized as an outstanding dissertation by the national association of agricultural economists (now the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA)). This award was an early indicator of the quality of Sisler’s work, but the Cornell faculty must have recognized his potential even earlier, because he was asked to teach an introductory course, the Economics of Agricultural Geography, while still a

graduate student. Appointed a Lecturer for the 1961-62 academic year, he considered himself “the luckiest man in the world.”

This appointment was the start of a distinguished, remarkable career. Appointed an assistant professor upon completion of this Ph.D. in 1962, Sisler rose through the ranks, and ultimately was named a Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor in 1987, a title previously held by his dissertation adviser, Ken Robinson. Dan retired August 30, 1995.

He taught the introductory course in agricultural economics over his entire career, and just three years after starting to teach, the seniors in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences elected him a Teacher of Merit. He would go on to receive the New York State Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching (1975), the AAEA’s Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching Award (1978), and the Distinguished Educator Award from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (1985). He also received the Edgerton Career Teaching Award in 1992.

The introductory course became extremely popular, with enrollments initially limited by the size of the largest available auditorium, but by adding television monitors in two classrooms, annual enrollments frequently exceeded 600. Dan also taught other classes, including an influential graduate course on research methods, which combined topics in research philosophy and methods. He surely taught more than 10,000 students at Cornell. Moreover, his approachability, warmth, and generous nature made a lasting impression on the many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students who entered his office for advice and “just to talk.” These students included numerous athletes, as Sisler was an academic counselor for Cornell’s Department of Athletics.

Of equal or possibly greater significance was his mentorship and guidance of graduate students. From the 1960s onward, Cornell attracted many applicants, often with Peace Corps experience, interested in development economics, and Dan shifted much of his professional work to the economics of development, with research on a variety of topics and in a variety of locations. He supervised 76 theses, four of which won awards, and he was, of course, a minor member of many more guidance committees.

Sisler believed that his graduate students should do field work to collect original data and motivated them to do so. This required finding funding, which was often difficult, and undertaking travel to remote rural parts of countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and Malawi. Such travel did not seem to faze Dan, and the consequence was excellent, original research as well as lasting friendships with his students. His last doctoral student, Jan Low, is quoted as saying that “When someone supports you as much as Dan did, it helps push through the tough times ... as you cannot imagine telling him you are going to give up.” Jan was the co-winner of the World Food Prize in 2016, and Dan was able to attend the awards ceremony. Earlier, he was one of a small group of Cornell faculty invited to attend the inauguration of Cornell alumnus Lee Teng-Hui (Ph.D. 1969) as the president of Taiwan.

The depth and effects of his teaching, counsel and friendship are conveyed by the numerous messages from former students, many of which were collated into a 12-page document by Professor Gillian Hart of the University of California, Berkeley. This massive outpouring of

memories is reflected in statements such as “a man of extraordinary perception, insight, good humor and humanity,” and summarized by “He was truly one of the Greats.”

Early in his career, Sisler published on topics related to agricultural trade policy, e.g., a paper on “International Trade Policies and Agriculture” presented at the 1970 International Conference of Agricultural Economists” in Minsk and a coauthored article on the exports of developing countries (*The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 1971). From the early 1970s onward, however, his research was almost exclusively done in collaboration with graduate students, and he was either a junior coauthor or merely an acknowledged contributor to their work. Thus, although Dan contributed much to the research of his students, his resume does not have a lengthy list of publications. His focus was very much on the success of his students and on the contributions of their work to the well-being of society.

Dan provided much service to Cornell and to society at large. He helped prepare the proposal that resulted in establishing and funding the Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD). He was a consultant on hunger issues to the presiding bishops of the Episcopal Church USA from 1980 onward; a member of the General Committee of the Cornell Graduate School, 1979-1982; a Cornell faculty trustee, 1979-1984, and on the Trustee’s Executive Committee, 1982-84; and a member of the Board of Trustees of Hellen Keller International, starting in 1980, serving as Chairmen, 1994-2006. Although much of his service went unrecognized, Sisler received an honorary Doctor of Agriculture degree from Purdue in 1989 and was named a Fellow of AAEA in 1987.

Notwithstanding his busy professional life, Dan found time to cross country ski, paddle down whitewater rapids, and especially to fish. His students and colleagues were a part of these activities, and the stories of their trips are numerous and legendary. He was also active in his local church and local organizations. In other words, Dan Sisler led an amazingly full life, much of which was devoted to helping students and the under-privileged of the world. Sisler is survived by his wife Carol, two sons, Steven and Peter, and three grandchildren.

Written by W. G. Tomek and D. L. Call