The late Colin Powell once said, “Leadership is all about people. It is not about organizations. It is not about plans. It is not about strategies. It is all about motivating people to get the job done. You have to be people centered.” You see, that’s what we do as our mission is, “To prepare and motivate men and women in agriculture for more effective leadership.” Leaders must have integrity, be open and transparent, and tell the truth. However, leaders must also expect those same qualities from their followers. To be most effective, leadership must work both ways.

The good news is that the Nebraska LEAD Program has an excellent reputation for developing knowledgeable and effective leaders for Nebraska agriculture and beyond. With the graduation of LEAD 40 last month, we now have almost 1,200 graduates and there are not enough pages in this newsletter to even begin to list their service to agriculture, their communities, our state and nation. We are so proud of them. I believe our graduates and the work they do are the equity we have in our program. The bad news is that not everyone knows about our program, understands the rigorous seminar schedule and commitment that participation requires, or recognizes the importance of the program for the future of our industry and communities. Have you helped us spread the word about the Nebraska LEAD Program?

We are once again recruiting our next class, and I ask each of you to help in our recruitment effort. I have said it before, but it is important enough to say again, “The strength of our program depends in large part on the strength of our applicant pool.” We firmly believe that our participants learn as much from each other as they do from the many speakers, travel seminars and other parts of our curriculum to which they are exposed. A strong, diverse applicant pool allows our selection committee to seat a class that is purposefully chosen to maximize their collective learning experience. To be considered for LEAD 42, which will begin in September, application materials must be received in our office by June 15. Please help us spread the word about the Nebraska LEAD Program.

I thank you for allowing me the honor and privilege to serve as the Director of our Nebraska LEAD Program.
A Message From the Chair of the Board

LEAD 40 has completed their final seminar and now launches into their normal, routine world with their new experiences and exposures. I have spent some time conversing with the Fellows about what the NALC Board’s expectations are for them as they utilize their LEAD experiences in their work and personal lives. I emphasized the need to participate - especially at the local level. We discussed how Civil Discourse (how your mother told you to interact in public) is crucial and finding what we have in common is far more important than immediately noting our differences.

We are a mobile society and some of us will move once or multiple times in our careers and lives. It may be challenging to become a part of our new communities, but we are meant to serve others. We have enjoyed, through our LEAD experiences, high-level training and exposure to new things and ideas. Let us not hang our leadership abilities in the closet to collect dust. I once heard former Congressman Steve King of Iowa, state the following, “The government is run by the people that show up.” Let us show up!

My sincere thank you to Dr. Hejny, Shana and Irene for their tremendous efforts to keep everything flowing through this experience. Also, a thank you to the NALC Board that faithfully worked throughout this very trying time of COVID-19 and multiple adjustments that were required for study/travel venues. Everyone did their part and the results are visible. Finally, let me close with a sincere thank you to all of the donors, large or small, for making it financially possible to continue this highly respected program. And, as always: recruit, recruit, recruit!

Gerald Clausen

NACL Board Rescinds COVID Vaccination Mandate for Participation in Nebraska LEAD Program

In November of 2021, the NALC Board adopted a resolution requiring all LEAD participants provide individual proof of vaccination. On February 3, 2023, this policy was rescinded by the NALC Board. This decision was unanimously approved by the NALC Board and was based on the latest science-based COVID-19 information, as well as requirements from key partners. However, for international travel, country-specific vaccinations will still be required if such is mandated for entry to yet to be determined destinations.

It is the responsibility of the Nebraska Agriculture Leadership Council (NALC) to prioritize the health of LEAD participants, staff, and programming partners while maintaining the integrity of the program. The current policies will be in place until further notice with reviews to occur as conditions warrant.

Thank You to Departing NALC Board Members

The Nebraska LEAD Program would like to thank Gerald Clausen (LEAD I), Jerry Catlett, and Scott Richert (LEAD XXI) for their dedication to our mission: To Prepare and Motivate Men and Women in Agriculture for More Effective Leadership, and for their years of service on the NALC Board. These gentlemen will be completing their service to our board on June 30. Without the volunteer service of individuals such as these, our Nebraska LEAD Program cannot position itself as the elite leadership development program for our industry, state, and nation.

Again, Thank You

A major part of my job here at our LEAD Program is to plan the in-state and national seminars. Mostly it’s wash, rinse, repeat. But, on occasion, a venue, caterer or speaker cannot “repeat.” Then, I do my best to come up with alternatives and bring them to Dr. Hejny and ask, “How would you like me to proceed?” Usually, we come up with a solution in short order, but sometimes, we’re left scratching our heads and scurrying to fill the void. This is where you, our alumni, donors and presenters have saved us. I have called on various alumni and contributors in the past to ask you for advice and recommendations and you have never failed to come through. And so, because it can never be said enough, thank you!

Wide Eyed Optimism

Our 2023 Annual Banquet was a wonderful evening! It was filled with good food, invigorating speeches, and lovely people. We watched as LEAD 40 received their certificates recognizing the completion of their LEAD journey. It was a very special night to me as well. My first day here at the Nebraska LEAD Program office was during their Kick-off back in September 2021. I joined LEAD 40 for lunch where they welcomed me and made me feel like part of the team. Little did we know what the next two years were going to be like. We all had that wide-eyed optimism just like a kid on the first day of school. As they were learning and growing with each seminar, they were so patient and kind with me as I was learning this job. It was gratifying to see the culmination of their experience on March 17 and I am humbled to have been a part of it.
Congratulations, LEAD 40!
March 17, 2023, the following Nebraska LEAD 40 Fellows received their program completion certificates:

Andrew Bellamy, Cozad
Austin Benes, Lincoln
Dr. Tee Bush, Norfolk
Eric Coufal, Wahoo
Chris Grams, Upland
Dylan Haas, St. Edward
Kurtis Harms, Lincoln
Tim Hashman, Hemingford
Steve Landon, Greenwood
Cole Lewandowski, Litchfield
David Moss, Lincoln
Stephanie A. Nelson, Minden
Mitch Oswald, Aurora
Nate Parde, David City
Rachel Prosser, Lincoln
Stephanie Schuler, Lincoln
Logan Sheets, Lincoln
Abe Smith, Kearney
Hannah Swink, Kearney
Curtis Welsh, Lincoln
Blake Wohlers, Scottsbluff

Thank You, Banquet Sponsors!
We extend our thanks to the AKRS Equipment, Farmers National Company, LEAD III, Nebraska Agribusiness Club, Pioneer/Corteva and Reink Manufacturing Co. for their support of the Nebraska LEAD Program by underwriting a portion of the cost of the Annual Recognition Banquet.

Thank You, Banquet Table Sponsors!
Farm Credit Services  LEAD Alumni Association  Nebraska Soybean Board
Gen 6 Ag, Inc.  Merck Animal Health  Nebraska’s Natural Resources Districts
Kurtis Harms  John & Pat Miller  NEOGEN/Kenny & Misty Stauffer
Kamler Family Farms  Nebraska Corn Board  ents

Congratulations and Condolences
Our Program wishes to express our condolences to: the family of Suzanne Czarnick (LEAD XXIX) on the passing of her mother, the family of Kevin Raun (LEAD XX) on the passing of his mother; the family of Karen Barrett-Ross (LEAD VI) on the passing of her husband; the family of Paul Mumm (LEAD XXI) on the passing of his wife, and the family of Brian Mumm (LEAD 31) on the passing of his mother, Joe Gangwish (LEAD XIX) on the passing of his mother.

The Nebraska LEAD Program congratulates Dylan Haas (LEAD 40) and Faith Choat who were married on December 31, 2022.

We also congratulate: Logan (LEAD 38) and Shawnee Williams on the birth of their son, Dax Chase on November 13, 2022; Sam (LEAD 37) and Eliza Schmidt on the birth of their son, Ivan Timothy on November 22, 2022; David (LEAD 40) and Tarryn Moss on the birth of their son, Cayson Ike on December 1, 2022; Cole (LEAD 39) and Jessica Pallas on the birth of their daughter, Merrick Alaine and Rowan Estelle on December 12, 2022; Mark (LEAD 34) and Haley (LEAD 38) Miles on the birth of their daughter, Blake Barry on December 21, 2022; Matt (LEAD 33) and Dana Dolch on the birth of their son, Corbin Matthew born December 22, 2022; Chris (LEAD 40) and Brielle Grams on the birth of their son, August Craig on February 7, 2023; Hannah (LEAD 36) and Lukas Rupprecht on the birth of their son, Roan Griffin on March 20, 2023.
2023 International Study Travel Seminar with LEAD 40
Costa Rica, Colombia, and Panama

By Authors Abe Smith, Logan Sheets, and Rachel Prosser

The preparation for the first LEAD International Study/Travel Seminar (ISTS) to leave the country in the post-COVID era began 15 months before as LEAD 40 gathered for the first of a dozen or so seminars. LEAD Director Dr. Terry Hejny frequently reminds us that the ISTS is, like all seminars, not a “trip.” Our ISTS would be an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the global ag industry and develop new cultural perspectives. To be certain, this was no vacation. During the previous months, LEAD Fellows compared notes from personal and professional travel and participated in cultural study and discussion to prepare for our ISTS. Leaning on each other as well as networking with past LEAD alumni provided guidance through the shared experience ensuring a successful beginning to our International Study Travel Seminar.

Like any significant undertaking uncertainty and adjustments are an expectation. This seminar was no exception. Despite the best laid plans of the director’s office, things changed fast. Originally scheduled to arrive in Guayaquil, Ecuador, on January 4, LEAD was forced to substitute Costa Rica for Ecuador due to civil unrest in the region. With less than 2 weeks to adjust flights, accommodations, and activities the plans were altered. While plans changed, the seminar objectives did not.

We congregated at the rendezvous point early on January 5 and prepared to depart Omaha for Dallas-Fort Worth and onto San Jose, Costa Rica. Our travel was orderly and on-time, and we passed through Costa Rica customs with little fanfare. We started our travel by motor coach east to Turrialba to Centro Agronomico Tropical de Investigacion y Ensenanza (CATIE). This was our home base for three nights and two days of education at the center and surrounding community. Our travel through San Jose quickly let us know that we indeed weren’t in Nebraska anymore. We passed through the heart of downtown past several governmental buildings, cathedrals, and churches, even stopping at a convenience store to sample some unique snacks. Our local guide Victor was helpful in sharing with us some local flavor about the country with its lack of military, its energy production (100% renewable) and its increased growth in technology-based jobs.

Day 2 - The roots of CATIE were planted by people like Henry Wallace and Ernest Molestina who invested in the creation of a research and education institution to support Inter-American Agriculture. CATIE is a unique institution that includes an orthodox seed bank, an incredible botanical garden, a research dairy facility and calving unit. The Botanical Garden is a tremendous live germplasm lab that is preserving the plants that are native to Central America. Fellows were offered fruits and flowers of multiple plants to inspect and even taste as we got hands-on with the garden. Produce like cacao, star fruit, achote, borojoa, red zapote, and coffee were among the items that were inspected by the Fellows. Germplasm preservation is a key aspect of CATIE’s mission. The seed bank holds a large collection of seeds from 57 countries with 93% of the total coming from Mesoamerica. It is among the top facilities for germplasm preservation in the Western Hemisphere. We toured the facility and garnered an appreciation for the detailed work that goes into the cataloging, storage, and security necessary to support researchers looking for unique preserved genetics, while keeping original genetics safe in the case of a doomsday event. The campus itself is also a grand habitat for birdwatching, especially as evening approaches.

Day 3 – On our final full day in Costa Rica (CR), we traveled to Aquiares, a small rural town to visit a coffee farm. Aquiares is focused on coffee farming as well as ecotourism, which is very common in CR. Coffee production: planting, growing, pruning, and harvest is a wholly manual production cycle. The coffee industry relies heavily on labor. We were surprised to learn that CR is struggling with immigration issues as they need to import workers from El Salvador and Nicaragua to perform manual labor. The farm we visited was a medium sized operation and while they sell to recognized chains in the U.S., they are actively looking to move their product to higher value levels by offering specialized red honey and natural processed coffee. We enjoyed a special hike through coffee fields and the forest that ended at the Aquiares Waterfall. It was a fantastic finale to our time in the Aquiares community. That evening, back at CATIE, we revisited the Botanical Garden for a nighttime wildlife experience to see what unique things we might be able to find including various tree frogs, insects, salamanders and lizards, toads, and even a tree surfing opossum. It was fascinating to see how things change after dark in the rain forest. As we reflected on our time in Costa Rica, it was evident our class had become attuned to the cultural nuances of an unfamiliar place. Sharing observations about the similarities and differences between the Central American nation and the United States went well beyond simple language barriers and food. Key issues within the ag industry, social structure, economic fabric, and geopolitical perspective were highlighted.
**Day 4** - Cruising 30,000 feet above Central America, one couldn’t help but admire the beauty of the topography. The lush green of Central America and the azure blue of the Pacific Ocean made for an idyllic farewell image as we climbed above the clouds. The next land we saw was Colombia. A mud brown river snaked through the countryside of green farmland dotted with livestock and flanked by the Andes Mountains.

We arrived at El Dorado International Airport in Bogota, Colombia, in the early afternoon and met our local guides Brian and Maria. After a light lunch, we embarked on a walking tour of the city center. This offered us a history of Colombia and Bogota through the eyes of the people who inhabit this city. Bogota is the largest city with approximately 11 million people at 8,600 feet above sea level (reference – Denver sits at 5,280 feet). It’s a unique feeling to not need a parka in January at that elevation. Bogota’s size and traffic made for quite a welcome to South America. The first thing many noted was the amount of high quality graffiti (murals) that is part of their culture. Even to the extent that it is supported by the government which identifies target areas for artistic “renovation.” The LEAD Fellows went on a walking tour of the city, starting at a fountain called the Chorro de Quevedo which is the purported location where Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, a Spanish conquistador, first established the foundations of Bogotá in 1538. To make the city official, a house and chapel were built. The City Center is the oldest district of Bogotá. The Church of Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria dates to 1703 and stands as one of the active symbols of the Roman Catholic faith that is an indelible aspect of Colombia’s religious and cultural identity. Plaza de Bolívar is the political square in Colombia’s capital city, Bogotá, where all three branches of government reside. Often the square becomes a gathering place for street performers and vendors. Simon Bolivar, who liberated several countries, including Colombia, from the Spanish empire, is prominently featured throughout the area. We were present on Epiphany weekend which meant the streets and square were very crowded and full of vendors, locals, and Colombian visitors all very eager to see what this group of Americans was doing there.

**Day 5** - Rise and shine as we departed our hotel at 5 a.m. for a short drive to the second largest market in Bogota: Plaza de Mercado Paloquemao. A “wet” market, the Mercado Paloquemao specializes in fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, pastries, flowers and more. The day after Epiphany as well as the early hour translated to a very sparse facility. Our tour guide and Bogotá local, Maria, gave a comprehensive tour of the local and regional vendors and foods available at the market and explained how to eat and prepare them. She provided us several samples from a vendor offering dragon fruit and the rare mangosteen among others. Many of the vendors have had stalls for years and prepare fantastic foods on site. Vendors take great pride in presenting their space and providing the best product possible. One stall we visited served a perfectly prepared, fresh-ground cup of coffee to many LEAD Fellows. Fresh meat is a common offering at the market as well. Delivered early in the morning butchers go to work on whole sides of beef, expertly carving everything from chuck roasts to oxtails. In Colombia, there is a significant effort to market U.S. beef. Colombian consumers prefer our beef due to its tenderness and flavor. Pork, chicken, and various seafood are available. While the Colombians import a significant amount of pork from the U.S., their domestic supply is increasing rapidly. Cut flowers are a major ag product for Colombia both domestically and as an export and were readily for sale. Our guide Brian shared that the growth of tilapia farms not far from Bogota, is another readily renewable resource. We returned to our hotel for breakfast. Then we met with Don Mason of the U.S. Meat Export Federation, who shared the USMEF’s efforts to provide high quality beef to the Colombians. Abigail Mackey, of the USDA Foreign Ag Service explained the role FAS plays in marketing and working for future opportunities on behalf of U.S. producers in Colombia. Miguel Galdos explained the efforts of the U.S. Wheat Associates to develop and grow wheat markets for U.S. producers. He meets with large baking customers, assists with their milling techniques and provides technical support for the mills. After lunch, Dr. Mauricio Cote, Climate Change Advisor shared with us his work in establishing climate-specific best practices standards across Colombia for corn and livestock producers. Many of his research projects are relevant for producers around the world.

**Day 6** - The second full day in Colombia had all of us anxious to leave the city and see the countryside and local agricultural practices. Our journey began early in the morning and took us through the city of Bogota while many of the locals were making their morning commute. As we ventured north, it was hard to discern where the city ended and the rural countryside began. Although, as we made it to our first stop, it did not take long to find the peacefulness of a cloud forest dairy operation. The serene beauty of the operation had us in awe. The dairy is situated at an elevation between about 7,200 and 9,800 feet. At this elevation and climate there is essentially only one choice for a breed of cattle, the Normando. Originating in Austria in the 1940s and 50s, the cattle are an excellent dual-purpose breed for Colombia. This dairy has a strong desire to be sustainable on multiple levels: economically, environmentally, and socially. Each of these metrics is being pursued at a high level by Juan Ramon Giraldo Arciniegas, the dairy owner. The operation is incredibly diverse and continues to re-establish species and to increase their forest hectares. Climate change was a topic we continued to hear about, and this dairy operation was no exception. Colombia was in a rainy season, which created challenges for the farm that have never been experienced before. The excess rain and cold weather were detrimental to the pastures and the reproductive cycles of the cattle. Juan and his team continue to pursue solutions to these new problems; he will not back down from the challenge. To call this place a dairy farm felt extremely odd to us, but it was just another reminder that agriculture is much bigger than Nebraska and the U.S. As we headed west towards our next visit, we were yet again reminded of the importance of infrastructure in our country. There are no interstates or smooth freeways, but rather many winding roads sandwiched between mountains. Ayura Flowers is a commercial cut flower farm that grows carnations and roses for national and international customers. Its owner, Jose Restrepo, met with us and provided an in-depth tour of the cut flower process from seed to cut stem. His is a very labor-intensive
operation. Around 700 employees work on 74 acres. Ayura Flowers is heavily dependent on global niche flower markets. There is a cyclical nature to the cut flower business revolving around some of the major holidays including Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. Jase outlined the difficulties that this presents in terms of his labor force, timing of plantings, storage, and transportation. He also has to balance the different aspects of the business including the sales, marketing, and production (i.e. if a flower doesn’t yield well, the marketing team can’t heavily promote it and the sales team can’t oversell it). The turnaround time on flower production was entirely foreign to us. From the time a flower is cut, only a short 48 hours later it will be loaded onto a semi in Miami, Florida, and then on to its destination. The interconnectedness of a global marketplace was evident at the flower farm.

**Day 7** - A common theme of our ISTS was early mornings, and January 11 was no exception. We departed our hotel at 5 a.m. for an early flight to Cali. Our flight was about 45 minutes. Another example of the importance of infrastructure: our bus drivers drove about 280 miles from Bogota to Cali and it took them 12 hours to meet us at the airport. After our arrival in Cali, we loaded onto the buses and drove to Nirvana, a nature preserve. Nirvana, at one time, was a very productive coffee farm. Due to diseases in the region the owners decided to pivot in a new direction. There were difficult times, but today the business is thriving. Nirvana hosts 10,000 people every year who are seeking refuge outside the city. Nirvana was bustling with many species of plants, birds, and a nationally recognized butterfly garden. After hiking, we enjoyed a traditional Colombian lunch at the preserve. Our next stop was Agrosavia; a national network of research facilities located throughout Colombia. These facilities are primarily funded through the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture. They are tasked with researching the many facets of Colombian agriculture that make each region a global trade competitor. Here we were able to learn about the fruits grown in Colombia, and the importance of the fruits trade and exports. We enjoyed tasting many of these during our visit to the orchard. The staff at Agrosavia were extremely generous with their time and their knowledge of tropical fruit.

**Day 8** - After a relaxing and restful night at La Huerta Hotel we were back on the buses on the road to Celsia. Celsia is an energy producing company that has multiple facilities throughout Colombia. We were able to visit a four turbine hydroelectric plant near Calima. Colombian energy primarily comes from renewable sources, and this was one example of the approximately 34 hydroelectric plants across the country. The combination of rivers and rainfall in Colombia have made it a perfect match for hydroelectric power generation. The setup of the plant reminded us of the hydroelectric plant in North Platte, except that the turbines were built into the side of a mountain and were approximately 400 feet below the control room. Colombia has a national electric grid and this facility provides 0.5% of the total power needed. We were impressed with the foresight of the Colombians in building these plants (this one was built in 1965). After the informative and enlightening power plant tour, we were back onto buses venturing on the windy roads in rural Colombia to La Huerta Hotel. La Huerta Hotel was founded on the belief that agriculture can be in tune with nature and still make economic sense. The owner and co-founder guided us on an interactive journey through a patch of native forest, pasture, compost production, and vegetable production. The Hotel/Farm uses its own products to feed guests staying at the hotel. Every part of the farm process had a purpose. If there was a byproduct - manure for example – it was composted and utilized in another process, i.e. vegetable production. The farm is passionate about helping other farmers to take control of their farms and utilize these processes to become more resilient, profitable, and sustainable.

**Day 9** - This day required us to be adaptable and flexible as we were originally slated to visit a sugar cane farm and production facility. However, due to above average rainfall these plans had to be altered. On the bright side, this change of plans allowed us an extra hour of sleep before departing La Huerta. Our morning travel took us through the flat Valle del Cauca where sugar cane was abundant and prospering. The ride gave us an opportunity to observe another drastic topography change - starting out in the mountains, entering the valley, and then ascending into a new stretch of the Andes. The climate and plants changed yet again in just a short time. We arrived at Hacienda Venecia just in time to indulge in a traditional Colombian lunch at this coffee farm. After lunch, we met the owner of Hacienda Venecia, Juan Pablo. Juan provided an unfiltered and raw view of coffee production. Throughout the walking tour, we appreciated his depth of knowledge and honesty as he presented about the upsides and downsides. Like grain farming in the States, coffee farmers produce a commodity and margins have been consistently squeezed at the farmgate. Juan had the foresight to begin diversifying Hacienda Venecia in the early 2000s. He began testing the waters of agro-tourism, value added products, and crop diversity. All those ventures have been successful. Today, Hacienda Venecia has three tiers of accommodations for guests, expanded capacity for specialty coffee, unique farm experiences, and multiple products that are produced and transformed into a higher value product there on the farm. This adaptation sparked conversations among those of us trying to think outside the box and add value outside of the mass-grown commodities in Nebraska. The entire experience here was one that we will remember for some time. The sheer beauty, hospitality, and hunger for a better Colombia was ever-present at Hacienda Venecia.

**Day 10** - Our final day in Colombia began with a bus ride and oral history of the country as we made our way to the CENICAFE headquarters near Medellin. There we visited with Álvaro Gaitán, PhD with the Colombian Coffee Federation’s scientific investigation headquarters (CENICAFE). Here we heard presentations regarding coffee cultivation techniques, scientific development, main regions of production, the role of small producers, and sustainable development within the industry. The Colombian Coffee Federation has three key areas of focus: 1. Administrative to manage commodity check-off funds; 2. Financial to buy coffee and ensure fair prices for farmers; and 3. Technical for research, extension, and education. The Juan Valdez coffee brand is one of the efforts of the Colombian Coffee Federation. CENICAFE fulfills the technical research area of focus for the Federation. Its purpose and work is equivalent to that of our Land Grant Universities: conduct cutting-edge research, translate it...
into practical application, test the application, and then educate and
empower producers to ensure integration into production practices.
Because Colombia’s university system does not fund research or
extension, CENICAFE is key for the industry’s future. Building on
our knowledge from recent farm visits, we were able to connect
CENICAFE’s work with the needs and wants of coffee producers. We
enjoyed a tour of their research station, seed production facilities,
insect lab, and seed bank. After a final cup – or two – of delicious
Colombian coffee, it was back to Hacienda Venecia to enjoy one last
home-cooked meal. Then it was on to the bus for a ride to the Periera
airport, a flight to Bogota, a quick overnight stay and another red-eye
flight to our final country, Panama.

Day 11 - Adios, Colombias Hola,
Panama! Departing Bogota on a
sunny Sunday morning, the Andes
Mountains split into three fingers.
As we ascended, the trepidation
for the unknown was replaced with
a fondness for the ancient and the
new we have experienced across
Colombia.

In flight we caught a last glimpse of
the cloud forests above Bogota, the
Cali plains of sugarcane and fruit,
and the powerful rivers cutting the
highland passes guarding the world’s
premium coffee. We experienced a small slice of Colombia’s culture
during our week of travel. The history and cultural diversity were
staggering. The kindness and pride of the culture makes it hard to
believe that the future of Colombia is anything but bright.
The cultural mission of LEAD enables us to look at global partners
with a humanity often overlooked in the transactional world.
Colombia has a pride and hunger Nebraskans should appreciate. It is
a hard land with warm hearts and a discipline to persevere. Shrewd
businesspeople with old-world manners, shopkeepers with kind smiles
and helpful consideration; industry professionals dedicated to a more
closely connected world and cuisine on par with any grandmother’s
kitchen. Colombia is a jewel atop South America.

Panama arrives out of the blue skies over the Pacific Ocean. Once
part of the same empire, Panama could not feel more different than
Colombia. We have just one final leg before returning to winter on the
Great Plains. We hit the ground running in Panama City.

After the familiar airport routine of landing and luggage finding, we
traveled by van to get out to the countryside. The tight quarters and warm
daylight encouraged an opportunity for camaraderie and new levels of
friendship among the group.

Our first stop gave many Fellows their first experience in pineapple
production. One pineapple takes 12-14 months to grow with each
plant growing just one fruit per season. Depending on production
needs, pineapple plants may be kept for two growing seasons.
Otherwise, the first crop is harvested, the seed (or pup) is picked, and
the leaves are cut back for easier tillage. The previous year’s crop is
then discarded, new beds formed, and the pups transplanted to
grow the next crop.

The farm we visited primarily provides fresh pineapples to local
grocery stores and to a few international customers. Handpicked
with knives, pineapples are picked at a ripeness requested by the customer.
The ones harvested on the day of our visit were for use in salads. The
farm’s twelve employees harvest about 4,500 pineapples each day
and sell the fruit wholesale for about 50¢ each. LEAD 40 Fellows
provided taste testing free of charge – all sampled products passed
with flying colors!

Our second stop was to a watermelon farm that grows fruit primarily
sold internationally. This particular farm included a unique twist in
production techniques that no LEAD Fellow had ever seen. Due to
local insect and fungi pressures, this farm grafts watermelon plants
onto pumpkin plants. Through grafting, the watermelon plant will
utilize the pumpkin’s root system to mitigate loss due to chemical and
disease sensitivity. This is the only farm in Panama that utilizes this
system after they invented the technique themselves as a solution
to the unique needs of their area. The fully manual process requires
hefty manpower. However, with a federal minimum wage of $1.94 per
hour, the cost of labor is not prohibitive. The farm manager explained

Cargo ship the Neptune moves through the Panama Canal.
Another cozy bus ride for the Fellows.

that they actually have to turn away families seeking work because they’re fully staffed. Like Colombia, Panama employers, especially in agriculture, have workers that are the second or third generations in their families to work for the same employer. This farm employs up to 250 people, ranging from 18–60 years old, and provides housing facilities for employees.

While 4.35 million people call Panama home, nearly 2 million reside in Panama City’s 171-mile radius. What began as a fisherman’s village has since grown into a pulsing metropolis due to time and technology. But as is true in most big cities everywhere, the disparity between wealth and poverty remains evident. Breathtaking high-rises cast shadows over impoverished barrios.

On our Monday night sunset walking tour of the Casco Antiguo colonial quarter of Panama City, our guide Inez discussed the rebuilding efforts in progress throughout the area. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, the refugee city has begun extensive efforts to reface, rebuild, or reclaim run-down areas to make it safe and welcoming to tourists and locals alike. Brightly colored doors and a mix of architectural styles gave a unique feel to the Old City and had many of us likening the area to New Orleans.

In contrast to Costa Rica and Colombia, the impact of the United States involvement in Panama is far-reaching and evident. The U.S. dollar is the national currency and speaking English is viewed more as a necessity rather than a sign of prosperity and prestige. From government to education, Panama is structured more like the United States than the countries we’d visited so far, but as we discussed in our breakout conversations, it comes at a price. The Panama Canal is the most easily evidenced example thereof.

While an incredibly important enabler to international trade, and a positive economic driver for the country, the impact on Panama’s culture, natural ecosystem, economy, and national identity is immeasurable. What would the country look like if the Panama Canal hadn’t been built? Where would the country be if it was owned and operated by Panamanians from the beginning? As leaders, we know that no decision is made in a silo. Our choices may have long-lasting impacts that we can’t imagine on the day we make the decision. Visiting Panama reminded us of the mindfulness and care we must take as leaders and generated several thoughtful discussions regarding this responsibility.

Days 13 and 14 - Our final day in Panama included presentations from several speakers serving Central and South America. Speakers included: Ana Maria Ballesteros, Regional Director, U.S. Grains Council; Peter Olson, Agricultural Attaché, USDA Foreign Ag Service; Stephanie Bryant-Erdmann, Assistant Regional Director, U.S. Wheat Associates; and Carlos Salinas, Regional Director, U.S. Soybean Export Council. Each speaker discussed their organization’s efforts to support the unique trade challenges and opportunities of their specific focus area. After presentations, it was “wheels up” for a short overnight in Miami and one last red-eye ride to the airport for our flights to Omaha. The final twist to the trip came in the form of a Nebraska snowstorm. Fortunately, the weather forecasters were mostly incorrect. We all eventually made our way safely across our state to return to our routines with expanded perspectives and a renewed appreciation for the comforts of home.

So much of our understanding of foreign culture is born of conjecture derived from 3-minute news segments, fictionalized entertainment, and op-eds. We infer culture through the lens of our personal experiences and bias. Certainly, no LEAD Fellow is under the impression that a couple weeks traveling in Latin America was immersive...though it was experiential. We gained experience in team dynamics and collaboration. We gained experience in forming a fuller understanding of how the U.S. agriculture industry impacts the world and the potential it holds to lead well into the future. Skills that will no doubt be put to practice in our careers and future endeavors.

Nebraska LEAD Class 40 would like to thank each and every one of you for following along with us as we made our way through Costa Rica, Colombia and Panama. We thoroughly enjoyed our experience and learned a great deal about international agriculture and different cultures.

LEAD 40 International Study Travel Seminar 2023
Cloud Forest, Colombia

We would like to say a special thank you to the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council, IANR Vice Chancellor Mike Boehm, Dr. Hejny, the LEAD Office, and the IANR Media team, which consisted of Jason Cooper, Tim Svoboda and Becky Aiken. Each one of you played a vital role in the success of the seminar. Additionally, we appreciate all of those who support the Nebraska LEAD Program in various ways. We thank those who made financial contributions, as well as those who share their time and talent in making Nebraska LEAD the best program of its kind. Finally, we say a special thanks to our friends and family for all of your support through our LEAD journey. Pura Vida!

Nebraska LEAD Class 40
LEADing the Way Diane Keller (LEAD XVII) was re-elected to Board of Governors for Central Community College. Brian Keiser (LEAD V) was re-elected to the Central Platte NRD, Sub-District 1. Deb VanMatre (LEAD XXIV) was re-elected to the Central Platte NRD, Sub-District 5. David Condon (LEAD XXV) was re-elected to the Lewis & Clark NRD, Sub-District 2. Ryan Reuter (LEAD 31) was re-elected to the North Platte NRD, Sub-District 1. G. Reed Philips (LEAD XXV) was re-elected to the Tri-Basin NRD, Sub-District 1. Marv Fritz (LEAD XVIII) was re-elected to the Upper Elkhorn NRD, Sub-District 3. Dean Large (LEAD X) was re-elected to Upper Republican NRD, Sub-District 6. Mary Eisenzimmer (LEAD 30) was appointed in November 2022 to represent District #3 on the Nebraska Wheat Board. Nebraska Soybean Board officers recently elected include Doug Saathoff (LEAD XXV) Chair, Anne Meis (LEAD 33) Secretary and Brent Steinhoff (LEAD XXV) Treasurer. Serving on the Executive Board of the Nebraska Corn Growers Association is Chris Grams (LEAD 40) President, Michael Dibbern (LEAD 38) Vice President, David Merrell (LEAD XXV) Secretary, and Andy Jobman (LEAD 35) Chairman. During the Nebraska Farm Bureau’s Annual Convention this past December, elections included two members of the Farm Bureau Board of Directors being re-elected, South Central Region Director David Grimes (LEAD XIX) of Minden, a member of Kearney/Franklin County Farm Bureau and Youth At-Large Director Lance Atwater (LEAD 34) of Ayr, a member of Adams/Webster County Farm Bureau. Bree DeNaeyer (LEAD 37) of Seneca, a Cherry County Farm Bureau member, was elected as the North Central Region Director. Steve Stroup (LEAD 32) of Benkelman, a Dundy County Farm Bureau member was elected as the Southwest Region Director. All terms on the Nebraska Farm Bureau Board are for three years. Anna Shadbolt (LEAD 41) is now the Grazing Outreach & Research Coordinator for AgNext. Chris Beerbohm (LEAD 41) is General Manager for the Titan Machinery, Fremont and Wayne locations. Mark Suhr (LEAD 33) was installed as Secretary/Assistant Treasurer of the National Association of Insurance Agents. During the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s annual convention this past February, The National Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Award winners were: Doug Temme (LEAD X), Temme Agribusiness received the 2023 Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Farmers Assuring Responsible Management (FARM) Dairy Award and Jaclyn Wilson (LEAD XXIV) & Wilson Flying Diamond Ranch received the Cow-Calf Award. The Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association recognized Doug Temme (LEAD X) as the 2023 Outstanding LEAD Alumnus during its annual conference held in Broken Bow.

Our Bold Beginnings

“As a member of LEAD 41 I have gained a better understanding of the infrastructure and inner workings of agriculture in the great state of Nebraska and the U.S. overall. LEAD has provided me with the tools, knowledge and connections to make a positive impact on my local community and on my profession and passion for agricultural excellence. I take tremendous pride in being a member of the agricultural community and look forward to using what I have gained through my LEAD experience to make an impact on that community. LEAD is undoubtedly a life-changing endeavor and I feel prepared and motivated to become a more effective leader for Nebraska, America and agriculture worldwide.”
— Caleb Ayers, Dickens

“The Nebraska LEAD Program has cultivated relationships that I would have never thought possible. Both personally and professionally, LEAD has improved my confidence and understanding of leadership in agriculture, being given the opportunity to gain experience speaking for myself, an industry, or an entire state is so valuable. In the past year my idea of agriculture has expanded in such a positive and eye opening way. Every seminar is different and exposes us to something new and thought provoking, they create an atmosphere for dynamic dialogues.”
— Anna Shadbolt, Gordon

The Nebraska LEAD Program has been amazing at introducing me to new topics from across the state and for the first time getting me involved in the political process. LEAD 41 has brought me back to my roots in agriculture and leadership and I’m excited to see where it takes me.
— Amber Shane, O’Neill

As I have navigated through the Nebraska LEAD Program over the past 9 months, one word has stood out during my reflections and that word is “enlightenment.” As each of us go through life, we are exposed to, learn and apply multiple disciplines. However, we often lack a complete understanding of the economics of our industry, state, and nation. The LEAD Program exposes us to every aspect of our economy and puts us face to face with the people who are influential in the day-to-day operations of our society. Whether at a local, state, or national level, the right to serve that is granted to us all begins with knowledge; the knowledge of knowing when to ask the right questions, contemplating both sides of an issue, and making rational decisions. As a LEAD member, I have gained knowledge, contacts, and the ability to ascend to the next level of community service. Thus, a journey of “enlightenment.” This is the journey that has been granted to me, the class of LEAD 41, and the LEAD Fellows that have come before.”
— Luke Zangger, North Loup

Dr. Allen Blezek Memorial Fellowship

We continue to work to fully fund the Dr. Allen Blezek Memorial Fellowship. Dr. Blezek positively impacted so many lives; please consider making a donation to this Fellowship by visiting the NU Foundation’s website.

http://nufoundation.org/Blezek

The Nebraska LEAD Program mourns the loss of long-time supporter, Steve Erwin. Steve served on the NALC Board from 1991-1997 holding positions of both secretary and later, chair. He and his wife, Janice, maintained a generous history of donations to LEAD which has been truly appreciated.
A Request from a LEAD Alumnus

Please consider honoring the memory of Jordan Nun of LEAD 35. Jordan died in March 2020, leaving a huge hole in our family. From April 1 - November 1 donations will be matched. The goal is to reach $30,000 - we are over half way there at $18,000!

To make a contribution, please visit the NU Foundation’s website. http://nufoundation.org/01156050 or send a check to the NU Foundation, 1010 Lincoln Mall Ste 300, Lincoln, NE 68508.

Thank you for considering sustaining our LEAD Program and honoring Jordan’s memory.

Dennis Nun, LEAD IV

Applicants Wanted for Nebraska LEAD Class 42

The application deadline is June 15, 2023.

Seminars begin fall 2023.

Contact the LEAD office via email at leadprogram@unl.edu or call 402-472-6810.