

William Shakespeare asked, "what's in a name?" For Jonathan Blackford, it's sheer coincidence his includes the color of Angus cattle. But it's no coincidence that the Potomac, Ill., college senior has chosen to make black more than a syllable in his surname. The Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) animal science major hopes to launch a career with cattle.

"I have a strong desire to get involved with the Angus industry. It's what I really want to do," Blackford says. "The cattle business has helped me fund my college tuition, I have volunteered out at the farms (at school) to help with sales and I want to continue my relationship with that in some way."

Blackford has solid ties to the Angus breed. His family's commercial cow-calf operation, located near the Indiana state line in east central Illinois, utilizes Angus bulls in their breeding program. Angus first kindled Jonathan's interest several years ago, but other events have helped fuel the fire.

"The last five or six years, I've really paid attention to the *Angus Journal*, the Angus breed and people associated with the business," he says. "But when I saw (American Angus Association regional manager) Jerry Cassady in action at an SIUC Bull Test Station Sale, I knew I wanted to try and pursue a career in the Angus industry."

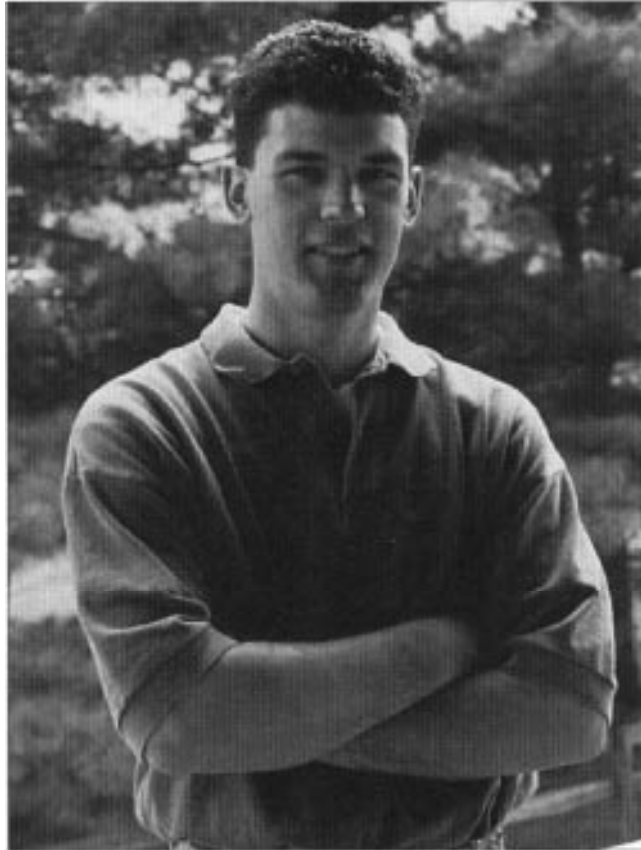
The SIUC Alumni Association's externship program opened one of the first doors for Blackford to begin quest of his dream. The externship program partners students with professionals during spring break week to provide juniors and seniors with a snapshot of their chosen career field.

Blackford asked the SIUC College of Agriculture to try and pair him with Cassady this past spring. The pairing was especially convenient since Cassady's territory includes Illinois, and the regional manager is based less than an hour's drive from Blackford's farm. When contacted,

# Partnering with the Pros

AGRICULTURAL STUDENTS GARNER PRACTICAL  
EXPERIENCE FROM EXTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

BY BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON



*Jonathan Blackford, a Southern Illinois University animal science student, spent his spring break with regional manager Jerry Cassady to gain insight into the Angus business and a future career in the beef industry.*

Cassady jumped at the chance to get involved with the program.

"I've always tried to do everything I can to assist purebred and commercial cattle breeders with their needs," he says. "But the importance of work with tomorrow's leaders is often underrated. Working with enthusiastic young people is one of the greatest benefits of this position."

**Blackford's Angus externship** began with spending two days at the Whitfield Angus operation based near Gillespie, Ill. Jonathan traveled with Bill Whitfield, making feed sales calls at feedlots and hog operations, and observing the Whitfield's Angus herd. Spending time with the Whitfield family gave Blackford a chance to jot down a few pointers on sales, as well as on cattle.

After the brief stay in south-

western Illinois, Blackford headed back to the other side of the state to travel two more days with Cassady on herd visits in central Illinois and Indiana. Before returning back to school at the end of the week, Blackford observed Cassady one last time, ringside at the Wabash Valley Angus Association Sale in Carmi, Ill.

"We spent a lot of time in the car between stops talking about Jerry's career," Blackford says. "He really believes in his career, and it certainly seems to me the pros of his activities outweigh any cons. I enjoyed the opportunity to talk to him about the Angus industry and watch him interact with others."

Cassady also benefitted from the experience. "I told Jonathan up front to ask me questions, or we'd probably be riding in a lot of silence," he quips. "Seriously, though, Jonathan did ask good questions about the industry. I also got his input on the cattle business, and learned more about the commercial breeder's perspective of the Angus breed. I was glad my schedule allowed him to join me in so many different settings."

**Setting up externship** schedules for Jonathan and other students is all part of the program for Lori Sefton, SIUC College of Agriculture assistant dean. She worked with Blackford and Cassady to make the match this spring.

"The externship program can provide learning experiences for both students and the professionals," she says. "It provides the students with an opportunity to make contacts in the industry they think they are interested in, and provides them with hands-on experience. They can take what they've learned in the classroom and see how it applies to professional situations."

Sefton says sponsors also receive benefits. All professionals get a chance to preview the quality of students SIUC is generating, and alumni participating in the program get the opportunity to give something back to their college.

"The response from both alumni and non-alumni has been tremendous," Sefton says. "We have had instances where students in the externship program have been offered full-time positions from the sponsoring companies where they spent their break."

The externship program has a history of success in the SIU College of Agriculture. Jo Lynn Whiston, assistant to the director for the SIU Alumni Association, organizes the program now in its second decade.

"We began the externship program in 1984 as a way to get more alumni involved with their alma mater, but it's grown into much more than that," she says. "We've found the program also provides good service for students and participating businesses."

Four other animal science majors at SIU also took part in externships this year. Daren Bollmeier hails from a grain and livestock operation near Marissa, Ill. He spent his time at Purina Mills in Vandalia, Ill., getting a taste, so to speak, of another segment of cattle production, the feed business.

"I saw all aspects of Purina's activities," he says. "I watched them mix feed by punching information into a computer, buy and sell grain, haul materials and even estimate expenses."

The partnership between student and agribusiness apparently pays dividends similar to the alliance between student and association fieldman. Like Blackford, Bollmeier hopes placing the externship on his résumé will help pave the way to employment.

"Spending your spring break working helps send the message that you're serious about your career," Bollmeier says. "I hope it can lead me to a full-time job within animal science."

**Practical experience** such as participation in externship or internship programs prior to graduation, has become more vital to securing a job after a degree is in hand. Alpha Gamma Rho (AGR) fraternity, which Cassady and Blackford both claim as part of their college heritage, can provide connections.

Thomas White, AGR director of chapter development in Kansas City, Mo., says AGR has offered programs in the past similar to the externship experience. One, the AGR Exchange Program (AGREP), was designed to allow alumni to work with students. Now, there are so many internship programs available, though, the program is obsolete.

"The job of our fraternity has always been to help promote the professional image of agriculture, whether it's through informal networking or helping students get a foot in the door for interviews," says

White. "Alumni are out there looking for students.

"Working in your field of study before committing to a full-time position works out well for students and employers," he continues. "It becomes increasingly important for students to take advantage of internships, especially since fewer and fewer ag students are returning to production agriculture."

Cassady agrees organizations such as AGR provide students with a chance to make employment connections. He even offered Blackford some pointers on putting together his résumé. Externships

can be a way to "market" the business, too.

"Whether its AGR or the Angus Association, these types of programs provide us a way to pay back our industry, solidify these young people and involve them in our profession," Cassady says. "In Jonathan's case, if nothing else, he's hopefully received a positive image of the Angus industry that he'll be able to carry with him wherever he goes."

