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Honors College Student Spurs Debate at Conference

Travis Gray presented analysis of agricultural subsidies on Mississippi economy

MAY 23, 2013 BY **MISTY COWHERD**



OXFORD, Miss. – With the growing debate over federal spending, Travis Gray created quite a stir with his presentation on the economic impact of agricultural subsidies in Mississippi during the recent Southeastern Conference for Public Administration in Coral Springs, Fla.

Gray, a native of Little Rock, Ark., is a senior in the University of Mississippi’s **Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College**. He submitted a portion of his honors college thesis, “The Economic Impact Analysis of Agricultural Subsidies in Mississippi,” which was the only undergraduate paper accepted for presentation at the conference.

An agricultural subsidy is used to pay to farmers and agribusinesses to supplement their income, manage the supply of agricultural commodities and influence the cost and supply of commodities such as wheat, feed grains or sugar.

Using the Regional Economic Model, or REMI, forecasting and policy analysis tool, Joseph “Jody” Holland, visiting assistant professor in public policy leadership, helped Gray with his analysis of a projection model of Mississippi’s economy without federal agricultural subsidies. He also worked with Gray on recommendations for the presentation.

Gray’s longitudinal analysis attempts to identify the economic impact of the state not receiving \$400 million to \$500 million annually in farm subsidies – how it would affect the farm and food industries in Mississippi. His analysis was that 3,000 jobs would be lost immediately the first year. But with the appropriate market mechanisms, he projected that over time, the economy would correct itself.

“The overall theme of our panel was called ‘Strengthening Rural Economies,’ which was ironic because taking away subsidies will hurt economies – immediately,” Gray said. “But we came up with policy recommendations for after we removed the subsidies.

“Our presentation really dominated the conversation afterwards. The public administrators and scholars really clung to the idea of changing the food system. It wasn’t necessarily a detailed, economic discussion of our methodology, but moreso a big picture about food in America – what we eat and where it comes from.”

The annual conference, known as **SECoPA**, gives students opportunities to present their research before an audience of practitioners, students and academics, said William E. Solomon, past president of SECoPA and local host chair. This year’s conference included 260 participants, of which 42 percent were students.

“SECoPA conferences are hosted in a different city each year within the Southeast, which offers attendees a chance to meet fellow ASPA members from different areas and also to network with potential employers,” Solomon said. “This conference is very student-friendly and it offers a great way to network with professors, practitioners and fellow students.”

Gray scored high marks not only for his presentation, but also for his professional demeanor during a dinner with executive council, Holland said.

“His paper spurred more discussion than any other paper in the room,” Holland said. “The comments that were received focused on Gray’s policy recommendations. There are negative connotations around farm subsidies, so the conversation was about how these recommendations would affect individuals.

“The feedback was about sharing experiences and models that complemented his recommendations of providing subsidies to local food economies. Even though it may be federal funds used, people suggested that it be managed and implemented at a local level.”

Gray has a triple major in public policy leadership, political science and French. He said he got interested in foreign and agricultural policy in high school – one of his friends owns a sustainable farm and does workshops for farmers. His interest grew by reading books such as the “Ominvore’s Dilemma”

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OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children’s play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

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Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school’s first African-American student.

and watching documentaries such as “Food Inc.”

“There is always a political debate about subsidies, which is the basis of the industrial agricultural system,” Gray said. “Without subsidies, the system wouldn’t be as lucrative. Industrial agriculture has all these negative externalities: obesity and public health issues, environmental degradation or weakening local economy for globalization. Dr. Holland suggested we look at an economic analysis – look at how subsidies are actually manifested in the economy.

“For the ideas I’m throwing out there, it would take a complete paradigm shift in America to change the way we think about food.”

Gray is unsure how he will use his research in the future. For now, he is focusing on completing his degree. After graduation, Gray plans to attend law school and, possibly, specialize in food law.

For more information about the Department of Public Policy Leadership, go to <http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/leadership/>.

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