

Beyond the Bachelor's Degree: Georgia College Focuses on Hands-On Learning

Doug and Dr. Mary Ellen Hicks teach the Beef Production Capstone course at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), Tifton, Georgia where hands-on learning is among the school's core principles.

Fixing fence. Vaccinating and tagging calves. Putting up hay. A day on a cattle farm? No, just another day in the Beef Production Capstone course at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), in Tifton Georgia.

Hands-on learning is among the core principles of ABAC, explains Animal Science Professor and Veterinarian, Dr. Mary Ellen Hicks. "Hands-on opportunities enhance the learning experience. Here at ABAC, we marry the science of agriculture with production practices."

This philosophy aligns well with Bekaert, an Arkansas agricultural fence product manufacturer that hosts an annual fencing school at ABAC for contractors, students and producers throughout the region.

"Fencing is not a skill you can read about and do. To learn how to properly install a fence, you need to learn by doing,"

explains Steven Sarson, Bekaert Technical Support Manager.

Because building a fence is a hands-on experience, Bekaert invests in a variety of educational opportunities for their customers. During their Fence Field Days, Sarson and other Bekaert Fence Pros guide contractors, students and other individuals who want to learn professional fencing techniques. "This fencing school covers a lot of detail about wire, coatings,

brace construction, and other best practices for a multitude of fencing situations. Attendees build fence right alongside those of us teaching," Sarson explains.

During previous events, Fence School participants built several hundred feet of fence on the ABAC campus. "They have a passion for fencing that goes along with ability," says Doug Hicks, of working with Sarson and the Bekaert Fence Pros. Doug is Mary Ellen's husband and ABAC Beef Herd Manager. "Learning from them is fun because they are having fun," he says.

In his role, Doug oversees the ABAC commercial cow/calf herd. Together with Mary Ellen, he also teaches the capstone

Beef Production course, where students apply four years of education while they engage in every aspect of caring for the school's herd: sire selection, AI procedures, calving, feeding, administering vaccinations and yes, fencing.

"This class is designed to give students a better understanding of what it takes to go all the way through the process of cattle production," Doug says. He explains that through their class, students are given a complete understanding of beef production – from genetic selection through harvest.

After weaning, the ABAC calves are sent to farmer feeders in southwestern Iowa, where the school retains ownership and students track their progress. The class makes the nearly 1,000-mile trip to tour large-scale processing facilities to learn about the harvesting and packaging process.



Even students who grew up in production agriculture benefit from science-based, hands-on learning found at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College explains 2019 graduate and Herdsman for Langdale Farms, Caleb Brown.

"It's our objective to teach them about what it takes to make beef. We are not just growing a calf to wean. We are actually putting food on a soccer mom's table," Doug says. "Our number one objective with students is to make them hireable. We are not just giving them a degree. We are providing them with skills that get them hired."

Even students who grew up in production agriculture benefit from science-based, hands-on learning, explains 2019 graduate and Herdsman for Langdale Farms, Caleb Brown.

"I thought I knew everything there was to know about cattle. Dr. Hicks and Mr. Doug opened my eyes up to a lot of different

opportunities and different ways to manage a herd and resources to help," Brown says.

A fifth-generation farmer, Brown grew up working on his family's cow/calf operation near Nunez, Georgia. With plans to build a career in the cattle industry, he enrolled at ABAC because "It felt like home," Brown explains. "I had heard it was really hands-on. Then when I visited and saw fence lines and cattle, I knew this was where I wanted to complete my education."

Compared to lectures, Brown says hands-on learning is much more applicable. "You can understand a textbook. But I found most scenarios in textbooks only work in perfect conditions. In livestock production, we don't often get perfect world conditions. This is where hands-on really comes in handy."

In his role as herdsman for a large cattle operation, Brown daily finds himself applying what he learned from his ABAC education. That includes fencing. Mary Ellen and Doug teach their students the professional techniques and tips they glean from attending Bekaert's Fence Field Day hosted at ABAC each summer.

"I have sat through every bit of all the Fencing Schools and I keep picking up information to share with students," Doug says.

Along with techniques, Doug and Mary Ellen say they discuss the impact quality fencing materials have on the overall fence quality and longevity. They also encourage students to invest in tools to make quick work of fence projects.

Gripple wire joiners, BeFAST brace kits and a staple gun are three tools Brown used when he built fence with his Beef Production classmates. He saw enough value in the products that he encouraged his employer to purchase them for the farm. "These really save time. When you save time, you save money. And in the cattle business, we are pinching a penny everywhere we can," Brown says.

Even when he's not teaching a class or leading a fencing demonstration, Sarson is able to provide customers, like Brown, with real-world, applicable fencing tips, techniques and answers through Bekaert's Ask The Fence Pro feature available on their website <https://fencing.bekaert.com>.

To get details on upcoming fencing demonstrations and Fence Field Days, visit

<https://fencing.bekaert.com/en/about-bekaert/events>

