Today on Across the Fence we join students at the University of Vermont as they take what they learn in the class and in their research all the way to the State House in an effort to help Vermonters. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. It's often said that Vermont's citizen legislature is open and accessible. But just how does a Vermont farmer have their voice heard or their views represented when bills are passed that may impact their businesses? Can an individual be heard and make a difference? How do you even get started to find out who to talk to? Well a group of UVM students got firsthand training on the process and even got to put it all into practice while representing the views of an important part of Vermont's agricultural landscape. In just a minute we're going to meet some of the students but we start with their professor. Joining me is Dr. Betsy Greene. Betsy teaches a junior/senior level animal science class called Equine Industry Issues. As part of the class she created a multifaceted project to help her students learn about state governmental processes as well as how they as citizens can get their voices heard. That sounds pretty cool.

Betsy.: Yes.

Judy.: What's the purpose of this class?

Betsy.: This class the Equine Industry Issues, it further develops observation, evaluation, critical thinking problem solving skills in the students. And of course related to equine industry issues. So for example we use a lot of case studies and we have things that represent which you would actually see in the barn. Not all the details but what you would come upon. They have to figure out things like what you know and that goes beyond just an eight year old thoroughbred mare that's lame on her front right hoof. They have to think about the housing situation what has potentially happened, before, during and could be happening, to cause whatever this thing is. Then they develop questions that may or may not be answered depending on the situation as in life. Then they hit the books and start coming up with differential diagnoses to try to establish what it could be. It's not always the obvious thing, sometimes it is. Then it might be a vet visit that gives them more information and ultimately they've learned about a bunch of different things that have related symptoms and then go from there and work on their observation skills. And look at the situation with a different set of eyes. Then of course that's also equine industry issues as a whole so in this project we have to state the issues that affect horse owners in Vermont.
Judy.: Can you give me some examples of that about the project for equine businesses? We started out by a homework assignment where they were assigned counties and had to find out the legislators senators and representatives in that county and what committees they were on. The had learn about Act 250 and current use issues which of course we know affect horse owners and business owners especially. Then of course you can imagine there liked why do we have to learn this. So I brought in Jane Clifford who is a lobbyist for dairy farms but also a lobbyist for Green Mountain Dairy to talk to them about the issues and bills that would actually affect small businesses which most equine businesses are. We talked about how to talk to legislators how to get your voice heard how things are done in the state house and we went from there. We created a survey and a lecture on how to create an effective survey then created a survey they called horse business owners in the state and had some mixed results that got some information on what was of concern to those horse owners and we presented to the folks at a legislative reception.

Judy.: Because there's so much more to it than just saying it's about the horse. It's about the horse but it's about the pasture it's about the land that's about the business aspect and things you don't think about.

Betsy.: You have no idea what some of these bills have unintended consequences. That's for many agricultural owners there's good intentions but you don't realize what they end up affecting negatively.

Judy.: The Across the Fence team did some media training but they also covered one of your past sessions leading up to the visit of the legislature so let's take a look at that.

Professor Betsy Greene / UVM Extension: ‘… and if you’re the equine business owner, you have a livestock operation in the eyes of the state of Vermont.’

Betsey Greene’s class on ‘Equine Industry Issues’ is wrapping up the first half of their spring semester [at the University of Vermont]. The class has been conducting phone interviews with Vermont equine business owners about the state of the state’s equine industry. The results have been mixed.

Student: ‘… all of them were really nice and like really really like, ‘yeah, I’ll talk to you for a few seconds.

Greene: She’s grimacing up here. I know.’

Student: ‘… every time I called they were like, ‘uh, sorry we can’t we don’t really have time, try calling back at this time.’

Greene: ‘O.K. I knew from past experience that you guys were going to have trouble.’

The survey covered topics from the number of acres and employees to liability and taxes. Students heard complaints, but also compassion from the people they surveyed.

Molly Hebert / UVM Student: ‘There were a lot of people that even though they weren’t experiencing certain issues within the equine field understood what other businesses were going through and really wanted to make a point to have that come out in their survey. So I had a
woman, who said, ‘I’m not, you know, dealing with this, but I want to make sure you understand how much of a problem the permitting issue is in the state.’

Many of those surveyed sited the economy as the biggest challenge to Vermont’s equine industry … this result did not surprise, Rachel Garbolino.

Rachel Garbolino / UVM Student: ‘I understand that it’s hard, now, for most people especially in the equine business where they’re living off of a disposable income of other people so that was expected.’

The class will be taking what the learned and sharing their findings with Vermont legislators to raise awareness about issues facing equine business owners. In the meantime, each member of the class got a chance to ‘meet the press’ in an exercise with yours truly.

Silva: ‘When I go to talk to somebody I have to care about what they’re saying. Care for me equals listening.’

Like the survey, most of the interviews went well.

Student: ‘… you never know what a horse is going to do so you have to cover a wide range of possibilities.

Silva: Was your farm involved in the accident with the horse trailer? Student: ‘No, unfortunately, what am I saying! [laughter]

For Hebert, this faux ‘fifteen minutes of fame’ gave her insight about the bigger picture of the media and public relations.

Hebert: ‘I love science and I love studying science and that’s about it, so I think it’s important to me to kind of become a more well-rounded person in that I have an experience relating to what I love to study, but also bringing in a part of the world that I know I need to pay a little more attention to.’ [laughs]

Garbolino is applying to veterinarian school, for her, the survey and the media training exercise was more than a practice run.

Garbolino: ‘I’m a horse person myself and I really don’t know about these issues about business and that’s not really something that I would go educate myself on, but I think it’s really important in understanding my clients, potential clients, and a lot of my clients are business owners and to really serve the people and their animals you have to understand their situation and their perspective on the business that I’m one day hopefully going to be working with. 9:02

As these students have been surveying the landscape of Vermont’s equine industry … they’ve also set their sights on what it’s going to take to be a success in the horse business and the business of horses. At the University of Vermont, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Judy.: Back here in the studio we're here with two of Dr. Greene’s students who have joined us. I want to introduce you to UVM senior Erin Redmond who is from Essex Junction and UVM
junior Mikyala Dieffenbach who is from Bethel. Thank you for being with us. Did either of you have any idea what you're getting into when you started this project?

Erin.: Probably not but we did gather a lot of information with our survey so was good to know what area equine businesses thought about issues and it was nice to be the prepared when we went into the legislature. I know I don't have any history with politics so it was definitely a new experience.

Judy.: What did you learn when you are talking to these businesses? What were some of the issues that surprise you?

Erin.: We learned a lot of the current use and how difficult it is for equine businesses to be under current use. It is treated a lot differently than dairy businesses.

Judy.: How about you MiKayla?

MiKayla.: The survey was a great experience was really nice to talk to business owners. Going on what Erin said about current use with horse owners is I talked to a lot of people who were in the process of getting current use and a lot of their land is under current use. I talk to one person who had previously been in dairy and both his land and his buildings were under current use. When you switch to the equine operation that took away his tax exemption for the buildings and he could only get it for his land. It's really interesting talking to different farms about what they have experienced as far as costs in all that.

Judy.: What was it like to actually represent Vermont’s horse industry with this real information?

MiKayla.: It was really interesting. It was really nice getting to talk to all the business owners and getting their feedback and we're actually able to take it to the senate and the State House. Talking to the different legislators, I tried to key into the people who were more into agriculture and gain their feedback. I'll you know you can go talk to this person others are very receptive. They're like this is how much I can help you here's another person I can help you more. It was really neat.

Judy.: Was it your impression that maybe Erin they considered the equine industry as an important industry in Vermont? Did you get that feeling?

Erin.: I think the people who work in the equine industry consider it an important industry. We talked to Chuck Ross who has been really helpful and he mentioned that the equine industry does not really have a voice in the legislature. We don't have any lobbyist or any groups.

Judy.: And he of course is the Agricultural Secretary.

Erin.: Yes he's very important. He encouraged us to continue to be the voice for the equine industry and represents them.

Judy.: You obviously got to visit the State House can you give us an idea of what some of your other classmates experienced going through this as well?
MiKayla.: Some had a very interesting experience of a lot of people hanging up on them so they did not have as much information of but I think overall everyone got a really good idea of what's out there for business and what's needed to start a business and then how to get your voice heard. You have to go into the State House and you can in Vermont you can just walk in and say here's my issue and how can I formulate a bill and how can I start this process running. I think it was really helpful.

Judy.: Erin were you surprised at all the different issues you had to learn about to approach lawmakers and talk to them about this intelligently?

Erin.: Absolutely we had to do a lot of research ahead of time. Talking to the local equine businesses was definitely the most helpful because none of us are equine business owners were students. So getting really the voice of the people for that was really helpful.

Judy.: What was the key thing that you learned as a result of this project?

Erin.: Probably how difficult it is for equine businesses in the state. I don't know of anyone realize the scope of it. How it is an agricultural business, but it does always seem that way and how they don't necessarily get all the same benefits as dairy businesses.

Judy.: How about for you MiKayla?

MiKayla.: Pretty much the same thing. The expense I looked into it a little bit and what I didn't know about was all the current use act 250 all that stuff that you have to if you qualify for it is really tough to get into the program that you need to get into the program if you have a certain amount of land just to give you a tax break so you can run your business more efficiently.

Judy.: How do you think you're going to be able to use this information down the road personally do you think?

Erin.: Any sort of public speaking. It was really interesting to learn the in's and outs of our local political system and to be able to find issues that are important the state.

Judy.: Were you surprised when you found yourselves talking politics when you enter this course? Thinking about horses.

MiKayla.: I wasn't surprised actually I wasn't expecting to go to the State House but definitely talking about the issues and how if you want to have a voice how to do that. Since we got the firsthand experience I think going in if I had something that I needed to say at the State house I feel more comfortable doing it now because I would like to own and equine businesses some point but will have to figure out if that'll ever happen.

Judy.: A little bit of a reality check?

MiKayla.: It's something that would have to be a side business for me because as much as I would love to have it as a full-time job I don't think it would be possible because the economy and the expense and all that stuff. For what I want to do it wouldn't be able to.
Judy.: Did you talk to any business people who said thank you so much for doing this it's so important?

MiKayla.: Yes definitely I did.

Erin.: I ran into some people who are very willing to answer questions. It was the first time they had been approached about something like this somebody who's willing to take their opinions and their feelings and bring it to the legislators.

Judy.: That sounds like a great project you must be very proud of your students.

Betsy.: They did a fantastic job; they did a great job.

Judy.: I want to thank you for joining us today. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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