

GRADUATE AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Outstanding Teaching Assistants

Wanting to inspire their students as others have inspired them has earned PhD candidates Stefanie Griebel, Agronomy, and Nina Serratore, Biochemistry, the College of Agriculture's 2017 Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistants awards.

STEFANIE GRIEBEL

Griebel studied plant production at the University of Göttingen in her home country of Germany. She worked in private industry for five years, including a year at a farm in Zambia, which sparked her interest in global agriculture. Her boss, a Zambian plant breeder, recommended graduate study in the U.S. and specifically Purdue.

Griebel participated in the 2015 Borlaug Summer Institute, where Distinguished Professor Gebisa Ejeta inspired her to work in food security. She joined the lab of Professor of Plant Breeding and Genetics Mitch Tuinstra to pursue a doctoral research program in sorghum crop improvement for Africa. "Professor Tuinstra is a great image for my future career goals," she says, "— the way he teaches, motivates, and guides me in the best way possible."

In her previous work experience, she provided vocational training in a research program in Germany, and then moved to Zambia to train workers in plant-breeding. "These experiences renewed my passion for teaching," she says. "I saw how education impacts people's lives and gives chances for better living conditions."

As a TA for four sections of AGRY321 Genetics Lab, she enjoys seeing how her students develop over the semester. Her goal is to include every student in the learning process and to "enable them with reflective learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills." Near-perfect scores on many of her teaching evaluations reflect her abilities. Griebel also received the 2017 Purdue University Graduate School Excellence in Teaching Award.

Her research with Tuinstra is supported by the USAID Feed the Future Sorghum and Millet Innovation Laboratory. She expects to graduate in December 2018 with a goal of returning to academia in Germany and continuing her research in food security with a focus on Africa.

NINA SERRATORE

Serratore grew up in the northern Minnesota town of Grand Rapids. After studying chemistry and dance at Gustavus Adolphus College, she took a year off to dance at Disney World before applying to graduate schools in the Midwest. Both her undergraduate research advisor and biochemistry advisor suggested Purdue. "I liked the small program, supportive environment, and faculty involvement," she says. "The prestige of Purdue's name was an added benefit."

As an undergraduate, Serratore had tutored students in chemistry and was a TA for a chemistry lab and for dance classes. Teaching at Purdue, however, was a financial necessity. She has assisted in several courses in biochemistry, biology, and the IU Medical School curriculum offered on Purdue's main campus. "Once I started teaching, I learned that I enjoy it," she says. "I realized that students are paying to have really good mentors. They didn't choose me, but they deserve a strong education, and I wanted to do right by them."

She also wanted to "light a fire of excitement about science" in the same way that others did for her. With guidance from her advisor, Associate Professor Scott Briggs, Serratore is an epigenetics researcher who studies how yeast develops resistance to anti-fungal drugs.

Last year Serratore won her departmental award for her teaching efforts — meaningful, she says, because the faculty members who nominated her were the ones who most inspired her.

After defending in August, Nina is planning to become a teaching instructor for this fall. "That will help me figure out if this is my ultimate career path" she says.