

GRADUATE AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Jeffrey Michler

"I tend to pursue broad endeavors, so my [Purdue] mentors have been helpful in focusing my interests. That's one of the things grad students tend to struggle with—trying to tackle too broad of a problem."

- Jeffrey Michler, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Agricultural Economics

THE STUDENT: Jeffrey Michler followed a liberal arts route to agricultural economics. He grew up in the Midwest technology hubs that employed his engineer parents until they became missionaries to Ethiopia in 1999. Michler studied economics and Russian history at Bethel University in Minnesota and then taught at an international school in Moscow before earning a master's degree in theology at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York. After working in finance, he earned a second master's degree, in economics, from the New School for Social Research. The theoretical, macro-focused program sparked Michler's interest in microeconomic development. "I came to Purdue (in fall 2010) because I wanted something more applied, more empirical," he says.

THE RESEARCH: With guidance from his advisors, Associate Professors Joseph Balagtas and Steven Wu, Michler is working with rice farmers in Bangladesh on grain storage and groundwater usage for irrigation. He collects and analyzes data on these activities as it relates to theory and best practices, looking for ways to help the farmers improve their efficiency. The work interests him for two reasons, he says: "One is simply the intellectual pursuit of new understanding, new insight. The second aspect is the sense of social responsibility that I feel."

THE RIGHT TOOLS: Michler visited his parents regularly and explored Africa from Cairo to Cape Town. From living and traveling abroad, he says, he learned "the wholesale application of theory from one culture to the next and to the next was bound to fail, that policies need to be couched in cultural, social and historical terms—what works here might not work there." Before deciding on Purdue, he took to heart the advice of a colleague at an agency affiliated with the global agricultural research consortium CGIAR: "He said, 'If you want to do development work, the thing to do is spend graduate school developing your toolbox. Purdue is a really good place to work on your toolbox.' And he's been right." Michler says he's become stronger in math, theoretical modeling and econometrics. "Purdue has given me the tools I need to actually get data and find empirical support for my larger theoretical ideas."

OPEN TO THE FUTURE: Michler enjoys teaching and would like to ultimately end up in academia, but CGIAR agency work appeals to him as well. He met his soon-to-be wife, also an agricultural economics doctoral student, at Purdue; they will be married in late September. The couple shares an interest in do-it-yourself food, so their wedding favors will include homemade jams, preserved lemons and bottles of bitters.