

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History



Clinton Buttar

ADA 2002, B.Sc. (Agr.) 2006

Interviewed by Mathias Dickie-Euler

Alright, so my first question or first couple of questions is a bit of an introduction. What year did you start the OAC or the University of Guelph?

Sure. I arrived in the fall of 2000, September of 2000. I was doing a diploma in agriculture program, so I graduated in 2002 from my diploma in agriculture and then subsequently completed my degree in agricultural science and I graduated in 2006.

That's really cool. Where did you grow up? Where did you attend high school?

I grew up on a dairy farm just outside of Cobourg, Ontario, so Northumberland County, between Cobourg and Peterborough, is close to Rice Lake, Ontario. I went to high school in Cobourg, Ontario, which is just over a 2-hour drive from Guelph from the campus.

Being so far from Guelph, why did you choose Guelph in the first place?

Well, I grew up on a dairy farm, so that agricultural connection. There were a few things I was interested in as high school was coming to an end. And what I wanted to do - "when I grew up" - I'm still not quite sure what I want to do when I grow up 20 years later. I knew that I wanted to do something that was connected to Food and Agriculture. With my upbringing on a dairy farm and the connection to agriculture at the University of Guelph and the OAC, it was a natural fit.

That's awesome too. So, compared to the other agricultural programs from other schools, what separated Guelph from the program that you liked?

So, when I first came to Guelph, I was in a program that is no longer offered at Guelph, I was in the Diploma in Agriculture Program, which is now offered, I believe, at the Ridgetown campus. But at the time you could go to either Ridgetown or Kemptville or Alfred, or you could come to Guelph, and you could take all those courses with very similar programs at any one of those. For me, I grew up in a rural area. I grew up on a farm and so the opportunity to come to a city like Guelph - not a huge city, maybe a large town or a small city - was an opportunity for me to go somewhere that I hadn't experienced. The town I grew up in was between 15 and 20 000 people. Meanwhile, Guelph was 120 000 or 140 000 people, and so the opportunity to go and experience a diverse culture, a small city like Guelph, and meet people, not just rural and urban, but from all over the country, all over the world. It is hard to get that opportunity anywhere else and still be in an agricultural program.

Yeah. Guelph's agriculture programs are superior to a lot of schools. So did you visit the campus before you started, or did you decide right away?

I'm the youngest in my family and I have an older sister and brother who both went to the university, and I had been there to visit them previously. I was familiar with the university campus and the OAC. It wasn't my only choice for schools. I looked at other schools, but I was familiar with Guelph, and ultimately that's where I chose to attend.

Where did you stay for your first year?

All in all, between my diploma and my degree, I was there for 5 1/2 years. The first year I lived in a residence in South Prairie. The smaller building that we lived in was called Homestead. I lived in residence again in second year. I had wanted to live in Johnston Hall my first year but didn't get in, but if you stayed in residence a second year, you got priority. And so, I lived with a friend in Johnston Hall, who was also an Aggie, for my second year before moving out and then spending the next four years in Guelph living off campus.

Was your first-year intimidating when you first got there?

I don't know if intimidating would be the word I would use. The University of Guelph is a big university, a big campus. Lots of land and lots of buildings. A lot of people. For me, it wasn't intimidating because I was somewhat familiar with it. I was just trying to kind of understand how everything operated, where all the buildings were and where you went for certain classes. It also presented a huge opportunity. I had never lived away from home. I was 19 years old, so an opportunity to live away from home, meet people from the huge diversity of people at the university, and the culture that comes with that diversity is cool. I was also a guy that was into just about any sport you can imagine, so when I arrived at the university and found out about the diverse intramural sports program that first year, I was into everything that was sports. They were never available

to me living in a smaller town, certainly in a rural area. And so just getting to take part in different programs, different clubs, not just sports. Obviously different sports, certainly intramurals and stuff like that, but different parts of the university through the OAC. It was a cool opportunity. I think a lot of people come to university to find out more about who they are and who they want to be. I think because Guelph is such a large campus, because the OAC opens so many doors to you, it can really allow you to explore who you want to be, the kind of people that you know you want to spend time with, and that really allows you to mature as a human being.

Yeah. So going back to the sports, you said that you participated in a couple of intramurals. Could you tell me a little bit about what sports they had and if it's a good way to meet people?

So, I was a kid that was into everything. In my first week on campus, I found out there were these intramural sports, and they were doing sign-ups, so I went and looked, and there were so many that I was into from baseball and hockey to flag football. One of the funniest ones I ended up being on was inner tube water polo. You start to make friends with lots of different people because people want to fill out teams and stuff like that. I would be on other people's teams, but if there was a sport that I was really into, I would try and coordinate a team and if I couldn't find people right within the group that I knew or the place I was living, being part of the OAC you have really social classes and so you could look to form a team through your class at the university. I can't remember what it's called but essentially you could go in and sign up as an individual and they put you on a team. What I learned after the first and second year was that a lot of times those teams' kind of fall apart because it's a bunch of individuals, but nobody coordinates it. I never had any problem coordinating it, like if there was a group of individuals put together on a flag football team, I was just reaching out to all those people. I was usually the main contact at that time, either phone or email and just making sure that the team got together. I made random friends because we had a common interest in something like flag football and put a team together with people from all over the university, so that was a cool social experience for me when I was there too.

That's awesome. So did you have any friends from your hometown going into Guelph that sort of made you want to go to Guelph or do you think your brother and sister had an influence on you?

Certainly, the fact that my siblings had gone there, and they had enjoyed their experience was important and I had been there and visited the campus with them. That was something that probably gave me a lot of comfort in deciding to ultimately choose Guelph and the OAC. I did have a couple of friends from high school that were going to Guelph at the same time, but that really wasn't part of the selection process. In fact, my friendship with them grew in the later part of university while we were there, but it wasn't the reason that I went there. I would say that it came down to where I was at in my life

at the time. What I wanted and what I was interested in, which of course was that whole connection to agriculture and food and ultimately, I didn't know where life would take me or what my interest would be coming out of university. I certainly knew going in I had a good idea of what I wanted to be in. Siblings had an effect on me because they went there, and I was able to see it and get that comfort and experience. It was cool that I had high school friends that went there. It was a bonus that our friendship grew once we were there, I didn't live with them or anything like that. That was a really exciting and fun time in your life and a pretty cool experience.

This is a different sort of question, but Guelph is known by a lot of people for its food. What was the food like when you attended the school?

I lived in South in 1st year, and you know quite honestly the food from the cafeteria, was, OK? It was very repetitive, like the same thing over and over, like, not every day, but it was very rough. As I understood it, it was far better than most universities. Maybe we didn't know how good we had it, but the meal plan at Guelph was insanely good. You could go and use your meal plan at restaurants, off campus. At the time, I think you could use it to pay for cabs or taxis. You could order food from Subway or Pizza Pizza, or lots of different places that delivered it at the time. That was awesome. There were lots of cafeterias across campus. Whether in the University Center or Creelman Hall, there were lots of them, so it was awesome you didn't feel like you were stuck eating from the same cafeteria. I probably ate most of the food or meals I had outside of my residence.

This is going back to O-week. So I'm not sure if you're familiar with O-week. It's the first week where traditions occur.

Yes.

Did you take part in O-week? Are there any traditions that you remember?

Yes, I did. I was in a triple in South and the two guys that I was living with, they weren't showing up till the end of the week. They showed up that first weekend and so I was there for about three or four days by myself. You pretty quickly start to make some friendships, but I didn't really know too many people in the residence I was living in, and I remember practicing for things like the prep rally that happened at Alumni Stadium. I can still remember some of the songs that were really popular at the time because we were practicing them. I remember going to that opening night pep rally and sitting up in the stands and watching it all. Not really knowing what it was, I'm watching because it's all so new, but my lasting impression was what a good job they did of making you feel like you were welcome and part of something. There are certain songs that if I hear them, I'll think "that was from my O-week back in 2000." I can still remember one of the

events later that week, they did a sort of Patio Lantern party up at Creelman Hall that everybody could go to. But a lot of it was just kind of wandering around and getting to know the campus and meeting people or people that you knew were coming to Guelph and you'd just run into them. Some of those relationships started that way.

Another tradition from Guelph is their homecoming. It's what Guelph is really famous for. Did you take part in that?

I did in later years. I mentioned I grew up on a dairy farm and we still had the dairy farm until after I had graduated and left Guelph. So as a farm kid you go home a lot on weekends, especially in the fall to harvest and help out on the farm and there's an opportunity to make good money helping out other farmers or your own farm. So, I would go home a lot on weekends the first couple of years and I did my diploma in Agriculture, graduated from that, and then came right back to do my degree in agricultural science. I spent more weekends during my degree in Guelph and that's more when I got into Homecoming weekend and some of those traditions. I was very much a part of the OAC traditions through my diploma, but I really expanded that outside of the OAC when I was doing my degree.

There's an event that occurs at the bottom of the university campus. It's called the Aggie pub. Are you familiar with that?

I'm familiar with that, yes.

Do you have any experiences that you can talk about at the Aggie pub?

Haha yes. When I was there Aggie pubs were on Wednesdays and they were at different bars all over the city. They were usually at Peter Clark underneath the University Center and then Thursday night was ranch nights, which is the Stampede Ranch at the far end of town. Aggie pubs were on Wednesday nights, and you could go to the ranch, the cowboy bar or the country bar on Thursday nights. There were a lot of nights, a lot of nights at those. As far as the university goes, I think most people who attend the university have it on their bucket list to either attend an Aggie pub or country bar. Rather than just sharing experiences, all I would say is anybody that doesn't have it on their list, should attend. I don't know what they're like now, but if they're all like what they were 20 years ago, at minimum you should attend one just for the experience.

When you were attending Guelph, were you familiar with the Bull Ring?

I am, yes.

At the time, was it a bar? Because now it's a restaurant.

No, it wasn't a bar at the time, I think it was going through a transition phase. I know of the history of the bull ring and what it was way, way back. It really wasn't used. I think it was an art building. It was part of the university, but it really wasn't connected to the OAC. It seemed like it was constantly under change or renovations and almost like the university wasn't sure what to do with it. Now it's funny because just a few years before I was there, my brother and sister were there, and they have fond memories of events at the Bullring. The Bullring was not part of my experience while I was attending there.

I'm going back to classes. Did you have a favorite class?

Oh yes, I did. I think the way I remember my experience at Guelph was, doing that diploma in agriculture was very hands-on for a future in farming. I got my degree in the first two years. We had very generalized courses, general biology, biology 1 and biology 2, chemistry 1 and chemistry 2, calculus and stats. Very generalized, very large classes and but as I got towards the second half of my degree, you get to take more electives and they are more focused on very specialized courses. And those are the courses that I remember most fondly because they really dialed in on my interests. They had class sizes of 20 to 40 people. You could get to know the professor, get to know your classmates. I remember taking a leadership speech class one year in my degree, but that's not to say I didn't take some awesome courses throughout. I remember when I was in my diploma, I took a forestry course with a professor named Jamie Simpson. That was a pretty cool course, because I didn't know a lot about forestry and trees and forest management, so that was pretty awesome. I also took some courses on things like plant growth and that sort of stuff and got to do some cool projects. I still get together with one of my best friends and we joke about a video we made when we presented it to the class, the sound and the auditorium didn't work. So, they just gave us an A+ because they kind of had to trust that we had done a really good job. But this was back in the day, you tape it, record it, and put it on tape. We didn't have the IT that we do today. Throughout my experience, as you get later into your program and take some specialized electives, those are the ones I remember that I enjoyed the most.

Expanding on that, would you say that your professors played a role in your favorite classes, or would you say that you had a favorite professor?

Yes, I absolutely do. You can take a good core subject and it can be the worst class ever if you have the wrong person teaching it, whether they're not interested in it or whether you just don't connect with them as a student. I had friends who loved those massive classes with a couple hundred or one thousand people in the class. That just wasn't for me. I liked smaller classes where you could get into the content and talk with the professor, which you couldn't in the larger courses. I absolutely had some professors that I really enjoyed. I think you asked the question: did they have an

impact? I mean, they have an impact on your enjoyment of the course. They have an impact on your enjoyment of your university experience, but I would say in a much larger sense they have an impact on your interests, and I think that shapes who you become or who you want to be. When I look back fondly on Guelph and the OAC, I think about the kid that I was when I arrived. I was still young, but I wasn't a kid when I left and I had a much better sense of what I wanted to be, who I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, and I think the quality of the professors are a big part of that. Some people know exactly what they want to do. They're there for 3-5 years and they leave, and they go do that. But that wasn't me, and I think there's a lot of people like me who show up, have an idea of what they want to do, or what they're into but that can change. Or it can shift. What you're interested in isn't necessarily what it looked like when you arrived. Professors have a big part in that too.

Saying that you didn't exactly know what you wanted to do after university, did you ever switch your major?

I didn't. I entered to do the Diploma in Agriculture and I did that. I kind of did when I moved, from the diploma to the degree. I moved into an economics and agricultural economics science program, which was for some reason not within the OAC. It fell under the Arts College, but while I was there it got moved back to the OAC, so I never changed, but for a small period of time I was actually outside the OAC. I was within the arts program, which was a little different for a farm boy, but I never changed my majors, but I certainly changed what I wanted to do when I arrived. I was really interested in the OVC and the vet program, and as I was there, my interest grew far outside of that path. So, while I didn't really change majors, I did change my interest in the direction that I wanted to go post postgraduation.

And with your program, was there a big workload and did you ever feel stressed at times?

The first two years under the diploma were, for me, pretty manageable. The stress was low for me or, at the most, manageable. We had smaller class sizes; the classes were based on application. The most stress I had as a student was those first two years in my degree because of a totally different approach to teaching and learning. Massively large classes, very generalized classes too. As I mentioned with the chemistries and biologies and calculus's and statistics, very generalized, not specifically focused, lots and lots of theory too. So, I experienced the most stress in the middle part of my experience at Guelph. The one statement I always think about; probably everybody hears it now and knows it, but it's really popular within the OAC, "don't let your classes get in the way of your education." Classes are important. But for me and I believe it to be true of so many people what you take away from your experience within Guelph and within the OAC, is so much more outside of those classes. The classes allow you to go off and get a job in that field. Your experiences outside those classes shape what you want to do and who you want to be and who you want to surround yourself with.

A big topic in university is people skipping classes and how that catches up with them. Did you ever skip classes and find out not to do that again?

I definitely skipped a few classes. I wouldn't say the lesson I learned was never to do it again, but I think it falls into that category of learning. Who do you want to be? I think one of the neat things about university and the growing up and maturing processes while you're there, you're pretty much only accountable to yourself, right? Your parents aren't responsible for you anymore, you're not married, you don't have kids, so you're pretty much only accountable and responsible to yourself. I don't have to go and go do whatever, but at the end of the day, where's that going to get me? Some people skip a lot, but I think it's part of the growing up process and learning. You only get out of something the effort you put in. It is part of the experience when you're there about learning about where you need to be and what you need to do and prioritizing things that are of importance. And most people are going to skip a class or two or more, but I think the bigger thing that comes out of that is the maturing process of knowing who you are and what your priorities are in life and ultimately who you want to be.

Would you say that the person that you become at university is the person that you are for the rest of your life? Things like routines, schedules and your discipline.

In many ways, yes, but not in every way. I think as human beings, we are capable of changing who we are at any time. But at university you learn, grow and mature. A lot of people show up at university at 17-19 years old and leave at 21-23. There's a lot of change in those years and new experiences that you'll probably never have after. It's a great example of a time in your life when you get to make some choices and for sure, deciding things like: how am I going to be organized? How am I going to execute these priorities and these projects? Not everybody just shows up with the right approach to all those things like studying. Not everybody knows how to study, not everybody knows how to complete certain projects, but it's an opportunity in your life to figure those things out and figure out who you want to be. I would say university or college provides you with an opportunity for a lot of life lessons and you get to decide how you're going to take advantage of those opportunities and those life lessons.

You don't have to answer this if you don't feel comfortable, but did you go through any tough times during your university years and what caused these difficulties and how did you overcome them?

I don't know if I had any tough times, I think it wouldn't be fair, especially compared some of the tough times some people went through. I had a pretty amazing experience overall. My best friend to this day, I met him while I was there. My wife, I met her through a friend. So, there are so many lasting impacts of my days at university and

within the OAC. I mentioned the first two years I was there; I did a diploma in agriculture and while I was there, the decision was made for that program to be canceled. It would only be offered at rural college campuses like Ridgetown, which are extremely rural areas, especially in comparison to a city like Guelph. I didn't love that decision. I mentioned, a lot of students who come to the OAC come from a rural setting and coming to Guelph may be the only opportunity in their life to live in and be part of a larger urban area in comparison to where they're from or where they grew up and I think for a lot of people, it changes them. When you grow up in a rural area, you're only exposed to very limited differences and I think coming to a city like Guelph that is diverse and a university that has the culture that Guelph does, it gives people an opportunity to find out who they are, to grow, to learn and know if they want to change or if they don't or who they want to be. I really struggled with it and to this day I'm not a fan of the fact that if you grew up in a rural area and you want to study agriculture or go into agriculture, there really is no urban place to go study that in Ontario. So, that was one of the biggest challenges as a student I had in terms of the university, but in terms of tough times, nothing compared to what others go through.

Coming up from a question like that, what are your all-time favorite memories from Guelph?

For me, the OAC provides so many opportunities and so many opportunities outside. I was part of my class council for a lot of the years I was there. I tried to participate in just about everything that you could within the OAC and then participated in lots of things outside of it too like the sports programs we talked about. One of the things that I got involved with while I was there was a guide dog program. There's just so many amazing opportunities if you're looking for a kind of experience beyond who you've always been or what you've always known. For me, because of my experience within the OAC, once I left university, I had so many connections. I got to participate in a provincial leadership program connected to agriculture affiliated with the OAC and I wanted to give back. I am and will always be so appreciative of how the university and the OAC shaped who I became. I joined the alumni association, and I was involved with that for 10 years, ultimately graduating and retiring from the Alumni Association after being President and past President. Just giving back shapes me. I said this before. It shapes who you want to be, where you want to go and so all those experiences combined together to help you. I know there's people who didn't love their university experience. It was very much a get there, get their degree and get out, but that wasn't for me. For me, graduating, getting a degree and diploma was important, but it was so much more for me in terms of a very large social experience to it. When you asked about Aggie Pubs and stuff like that, that's part of it but there's just so many opportunities at that school to really participate. A lot of parents ask if Guelph is a good school to go to or if the OAC is a good college. What I often tell people is that when you arrive, there's just everybody from every corner of life. There's such an international component and so much diversity, so much culture, that you that you can really focus in on who you want to be and the type of people that you want to associate with and socialize with and the things you want to do. Maybe you want to step outside your comfort zone and try a new

experience and so for me, I just encourage people to discover who they are and what they want to be.

You took part in a program for Guide Dogs? Could you expand on that?

Yes. I was doing something for our OAC's class one day. I remember standing outside Johnston Hall selling ice cream, and somebody came along and purchased it, and they had a guide dog and were affiliated with something happening at the university. It wasn't with the OAC. It was with the university and so I ended up getting more information about that and for the last little bit of time that I was at the university, because it was right at the end of my degree. Then for a few years after I was heavily involved in a program that raises Guide Dogs. The dogs ultimately go off to support families with children with autism which isn't really part of my OAC experience, but it was certainly the type of thing that would have never happened if it wasn't for the whole social experience as part of the university.

That's a program that I would like to take part in but I don't know if they still offer that.

Yes, they may not. I know that there are guide dog raising programs affiliated maybe not with the university, but in the city or something like that. So do a quick google and you will find out the information. The program I worked with was based out of Cambridge, but there was an affiliation happening with the university.

One of my last questions is if you were trying to persuade someone to go to the University of Guelph, how would you persuade them?

I think it goes back to what I said just a few minutes ago. I mean, it doesn't matter how confident you are in who you are, or who believes in you. You are what you want to be or what you want to go do. Whether you're confident or not, Guelph just offers this opportunity to lean into so much opportunity and diversity to do different things, meet different people, try things that that are both inside and outside your comfort zone and not only that. It's one of the best cities in all of Canada to live in, at a university that has a reputation for creating strong individuals, good leaders. There's no downside to attending, and at the same time, no two people are going to have the exact same experience, right. So you get people that experience all the university has to offer and all the different things that I've talked about and then there's those who really are just there for their degree and to move on or to their education.

How would you get someone who you said doesn't enjoy their university experience enjoy their experience?

You can't control others. You can only control yourself; I suppose. But if somebody isn't enjoying their experience or if they're only there for one reason and that's what they do and that's all they want to do and they're not interested in anything beyond the education component, then to each their own. So, I think the question of anybody who's not enjoying themselves is: Why? What is it that you're not enjoying? Because there's almost always alternative options. Whether it's where you're living, what you're doing, what you're studying, the program, the social circle you're in... I mean, there's just so many different people, so many different programs, so many different activities that if somebody's not enjoying themselves, I think I would challenge that person to be honest about what it is they're not enjoying because I promise there's something else there for you and you just have to go discover it.

My last question is: would you be willing to share any photos of your years at the OAC?

Yes, I would have to look, Mathias, I'm sure I do. I know I have photo books that I just haven't opened up in like 10 years, but if I can find them, you just want me to scan and email you some?

That would be perfect.

I have pictures from different things I participated in and stuff like that. So like, what do you know what kind of pictures you're looking for?

Just anything that you think casts light on the traditions. Any traditions you took part in that you have any pictures of?

I'll take a look through and I'll see what I can find. When do you need it by?

Take your time, it really doesn't matter.

OK, well I've got your email, so I'll look for some. I'll scan them and then I'll email them to you.

Ok, perfect. I want to thank you so much. You gave great answers. It's exactly what I could have asked for.

Yeah, no problem. It was good to find a time that worked and if you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask.

Alright, thank you so much.

You're welcome. Nice to meet you.

Nice to meet you too.

Take care.