Two Ph.D. Students, Two Decades Apart, Earn Prestigious NSF Grants Thanks to Donor-Funded Summer Fellowships

By Julie Wrinn

Trust in political institutions is waning in many parts of the world, including in the United States, and Political Science doctoral student Gregory Saxton wants to figure out why. He received an extremely competitive $15,000 National Science Foundation (NSF) dissertation research grant to study perceptions of fairness, political support, and representation in conditions of economic inequality in Argentina. His research portrays how high levels of inequality challenge a fundamental principle of democracy and also erode citizens’ support for democracy.

For any graduate student, receiving an NSF dissertation grant is a very big deal: in terms of prestige and resume-boosting, it’s on par with publication in a leading research journal. It is likely to position that student in the top tier of consideration for a tenure track position. So how did Saxton win this grant? Certainly he had sound and timely hypotheses, but he also had seed money. That seed money—a fraction of the NSF grant amount—enabled Saxton to make an initial trip to Argentina to lay the groundwork for his NSF grant application. Without it, as a typical graduate student with limited means, he would not have been able to make the trip. Successful grant applications usually require pilot project results and demonstrated feasibility. Saxton had promising pilot results from this trip, and his proposed fieldwork seemed feasible since he had already conducted fieldwork in Argentina.

That seed money came in the form of a newly established competitive grant, the Coleman Summer Research Fellows, provided by Kenneth M. Coleman, Ph.D., who served on the faculty of the UK Political Science Department for 18 years, including as chair, and now serves on its Alumni Board. It’s not the first time this has happened. Dr. Coleman’s recent gift was inspired by his memory of a similar gift that boosted graduate student research during his tenure at UK decades ago.

That gift came from Ted Collins (B.A. political science ’74), who was a great friend of the Political Science Department. His connection to UK was strengthened through his spouse, Dr. Belva Collins, who earned a Ph.D. in child development and special education at UK, later serving on the UK faculty for many years. In the 1980s Collins provided summer research grants to graduate students in the political science department, named in honor of Professor Sidney Ulmer, because of the admiration that Mr. Collins had for Dr. Ulmer as his mentor and because Dr. Ulmer felt that summer support for graduate students was among the highest needs of a department that he himself had chaired. Explained Collins, “Dr. Ulmer had a gift for provoking curiosity and critical inquiry in academic scholarship, which not only led to my having graduated from the University but also developing a life-long friendship with this consummate gentleman. I was profoundly moved with his passing.”

One recipient of this fund was John Speer (Ph.D. ’99). Speer first received a S. Sidney Ulmer Summer Fellowship in 1989 to fund an exploratory research trip to Managua that he took with Dr. Coleman that year. Explained Speer, “The meetings and interviews that we did that summer shaped my dissertation proposal. In 1990, I received the Summer Doctoral Fellowship from the Graduate School. This award went a long way toward funding the first stage of my dissertation
field research, which consisted of case study interviews and observation for several months that summer.” That preliminary work strengthened Speer’s application for an NSF doctoral research grant, which he earned in 1991. That larger grant paid for Speer to plan and supervise a large-N survey in Managua, which he was able to commission from a local survey research firm. “I’m delighted to hear about the Coleman Summer Award,” added Speer. “What to do about summer income and how to fund summer research is a problem for many graduate students.”

Speer has since made his career at Houston Community College, where he also served as department chair for 10 years. “I’ve designed and taught a course in global citizenship for students who attend the Salzburg Seminar, taken students to New York for Model U.N., sponsored model Arab League, went on a faculty exchange to lecture at three universities in southern Brazil, taught students visiting the U.S. on a State Department grant, designed and taught courses for the Honors College, among other projects at HCC.”

Remembering how Speer was able to leverage his grant into a larger NSF award, Coleman knew he wanted to provide similar support for today’s graduate students. “Summer research fellowships help UK graduate students to complete Ph.D. dissertations and get on to careers of research and teaching,” he explained. “But to get to the teaching, Ph.D. dissertations require that students master research skills so they can distinguish between good research and bad, between knowledge that is reliable and assertions that are questionable.”

Since the days of S. Sidney Ulmer and before, “that is what the Ph.D. program at UK has sought to do and continues to succeed in doing,” said Coleman. “I’m proud that both Speer and Saxton have competed successfully at the national level, leveraging local investments, to build on the instruction they have received in the UK graduate program.”

It was especially rewarding to learn that among his first recipients, Gregory Saxton, has already achieved at a level that brings the earlier example full circle to a new generation. Saxton expects to earn his Ph.D. in May 2019. He explained, “My NSF award, made possible by Dr. Coleman’s gift, has opened new doors, made me a more competitive candidate for a tenure-track job, and better positioned me to secure additional grant funding for my research in the future.” Saxton’s bright future demonstrates the power of alumni giving and its tangible impact on the Political Science Department.