

# Dare Mighty Changes

**09/22/2023**

A hallmark of the Huntsman School is the opportunity for undergraduate students to work closely with faculty and researchers to conduct relevant and impactful research. In the past year, scores of students worked with our faculty to research, write, and publish academic research on a variety of topics. In the next few pages, we highlight five students who produced meaningful thought leadership on a diverse set of issues through our Center for Growth and Opportunity (CGO), which conducts economic research on immigration, technology, and environmental stewardship. The CGO's researchers find public policy solutions that help unleash innovation and entrepreneurship and empower individuals to find cooperative solutions to today's biggest challenges. Each academic year, up to 40 Huntsman students become deeply immersed in the research experience and coauthor peer-reviewed research publications.



**Mitch Lott**

**Finance and International Business, '23**

Expanding water markets to address Utah's water crisis

Although the 2022-23 winter may have suggested otherwise, Utah faces an uphill battle with water scarcity and drought amid rapid population growth. During his time at CGO, undergraduate research fellow Mitch Lott explored the role of policy in helping Utah address its ongoing water crisis. Mitch worked with CGO research manager Jennifer Morales to identify simple policy changes that could help allocate water more efficiently in Utah. Agriculture makes up 85 percent of Utah's water use. Mitch's research suggests that expanding water markets can help address the issue. Making it easier to trade water rights would allow water to move to where it is needed most, without unduly burdening farmers who currently hold water rights. Mitch co-authored an article outlining his key policy recommendations.

During his time at CGO, Mitch took advantage of opportunities to get his research in front of policymakers who are working to address the water crisis. He presented his research to Utah policymakers at the Research on Capitol Hill event. Mitch also took his research to academic audiences at both the Association of Private Enterprise Education's annual conference and the Mercatus Center's annual Markets & Society conference. In the spring of 2023, Mitch graduated from the Huntsman School with a bachelor's degree in economics and international studies and is now putting his skills to work at the Federal Reserve Board as a research assistant.



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## **Brenden Bodily**

### **Finance and International Business, '24**

What works in reskilling? Evaluating alternative education options

Artificial intelligence has made massive leaps in 2023, raising questions about what the impact of the technology will be on workers. Although today's technology may be new, adapting to technological change has been a perennial issue for workers throughout history. From the creation of the printing press to the personal computer, new technologies both create opportunities and push workers to gain new skills to stay competitive.

In this research, CGO undergraduate research fellow Brenden Bodily examined three types of programs to better understand what works well in reskilling. Trade schools, apprenticeships, and coding bootcamps all provide workers the opportunity to learn new skills that can help them move into a new industry. Brenden found that career-focused curriculums, transparency in employment outcomes, and industry-recognized credentials are all core aspects of successful reskilling programs.

In the fall of 2023, Brenden will be a senior at Utah State University. He is majoring in Finance and International Business. His work on reskilling has inspired him to add a minor in web development to help broaden his skills. He has presented his research at USU's Fall Student Research Symposium, the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research, and the Association of Private Enterprise Education's 2023 conference in Cancun, Mexico.



## Alexis Fadel

### Data Analytics and Economics, '22, Master's in Data Analytics, '23

Reforming plea bargaining to improve our criminal justice system

We all know the phrase "innocent until proven guilty." But since 1989, more than 800 people in the U.S. have pled guilty and been convicted of a crime for which they were later exonerated. Over 90 percent of convictions in the U.S. are decided through plea bargains, in which the defendant agrees to plead guilty to a lesser charge in exchange for a more lenient sentence.

CGO graduate research fellow Alexis (Lexi) Fadel devoted her research to exploring why plea bargaining has become so common and how we could reform the U.S. justice system to reduce the number of innocent people who spend their lives in prison for crimes they did not commit.

As Lexi discovered, plea bargaining was created with good intentions—to help resolve cases more efficiently and reduce the backlog of cases waiting for decisions. But prosecutors often increase their own conviction rates by encouraging defendants to enter plea bargains. This can result in innocent people being pressured into plea bargains in order to avoid a harsher sentence if they were to go to trial. Lexi's research concludes with several recommendations for reforming the plea-bargaining system, including creating more accountability for prosecutors in the case of wrongful convictions.

Lexi coauthored an article outlining her key findings and recommendations. She graduated from the Huntsman School in the spring of 2023 with a master's in data analytics. She is beginning her career as an FP&A analyst at Breeze Airways.



## **Harrison Naftel**

### **Master's in Economics, '22**

Can private agricultural lands contribute to carbon sequestration?

In an effort to address climate change, governments and corporations alike have pledged to lower their carbon emissions. One way to do this is through carbon markets. These markets work when a firm reduces its emissions and then sells a carbon offset "credit." Other companies can then purchase these credits to help offset their own carbon footprint. Another method is through carbon sequestration offsets, where carbon is physically sequestered from the atmosphere and then sold as offsets.

One way to sequester carbon is through regenerative agricultural practices that improve soil health. In a peer-reviewed policy paper published in April of 2023, CGO graduate fellow Harrison Naftel investigates the potential of private farmlands to help provide carbon sequestration offsets. He finds that "carbon farming" has the potential to help address climate change and suggests several policy solutions to help make it more financially viable for agricultural producers.

During his time at CGO, Harrison co-authored full-length research as well as op-eds in the Hill and regulatory comments to help inform the Biden Administration's conservation plans. Harrison graduated in December of 2022 with his master's in economics from the Huntsman School. He is now putting his skills to work at the Nature Conservancy in Hawaii.



## **Paul Johnston**

### **Economics and Finance, '25**

How can the U.S. establish a secure uranium supply chain?

Growing the U.S. economy and addressing climate change will require policymakers and businesses alike to work to ensure an abundant supply of energy that is reliable, affordable, and low carbon. One of the most promising technologies for working toward this goal is nuclear energy. In this research, CGO undergraduate researcher Paul Johnston has been examining how the U.S. can establish a secure supply of uranium—a key input for producing nuclear power.

Currently, almost 50 percent of the U.S. uranium supply comes from Kazakhstan and Russia. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, this created massive instability in global energy markets. Paul's research suggests that diversifying our uranium trading partners or increasing domestic production could help provide a reliable source of uranium to help power a future of nuclear energy.

This fall, Paul plans to continue his research at CGO by examining state-level regulation of nuclear energy. Paul will graduate from the Huntsman School in the spring of 2025 with degrees in economics and finance.