



Steve Larmer

B.Sc. 2010, M.Sc. 2012, PhD 2016

Interviewed by Marko Kralji

So, what year did you start at the OAC in the University of Guelph?

I guess it would have been fall 2006 that I would have started, although I didn't start in OAC. I started in biomedical science for the first semester. Technically, I probably started in OAC in early 2007.

When did you decide to do the switch from the biomedical science to the actual OAC?

The short answer is people. I grew up doing 4-H programs as a rural youth. When I came to Guelph, I had a whole bunch of friends who were all in the OAC, I was spending all my time with them. I came to Guelph thinking I wanted to be a doctor or a pharmacist or something in that area. I got into the biomedical student's society, started to talk to people and realized all of the conversations were about competition. I was in first year and I was ready to enjoy myself, have fun, learn. I didn't want to competitive conversations about how I was building my resume, I wanted a more well-rounded student experience. I realized that maybe that program wasn't the best fit for me. All my friends were in all the same classes because that was how it worked in animal science or plant science. I ended up transferring to animal biology because it was basically all the exact same courses in first year, so I didn't have to change anything. That was more where I fit and that's the path I went down.

You said you grew up in a rural setting, is that what drew you to Guelph?

Yes, both my parents farm and both my parents are Guelph grads, they met at Guelph. My older brother went to Guelph, my uncles, it's very much a little bit of an institution in our family. I wasn't 100% sure when I was in high school that I would end up at Guelph. I toured a bunch of other campuses and when I toured Guelph I just fell in love with the campus and the vibe, and that was enough to push me over the edge. I can remember in first- and second year visiting friends at Western and McMaster and at a couple other universities and going to the cafeteria, eating their food and thinking "oh you guys eat like **** here." It's so much worse.

What year did you end up graduating?

2010, 2012 and 2015. I have all three, I have a bachelor's, a master's, and a PhD all from Guelph, all in the OAC.

Do you remember any of your professor's or perhaps some professors that stood out to you and made your experience at the OAC a little more memorable or enjoyable.

Probably the one that stands out most to me is John Walton. He has passed since I left, but he taught a reproduction course and was a very magnanimous professor, big personality, he was wonderful. He taught a course called Dairy Challenge; it was a 4th year course. The whole idea of the course is you go to dairy farms and look at their operating systems then you do an audit. As small teams you work together on a plan and a proposal of what you would change on the farm and make a business and ROI case on why you would do that. He was really excellent at giving you the tools you needed, but also really empowering teams to take it in whatever direction they wanted, to be creative. That was a really interesting course. The exciting thing in that course is that the top students get picked to go and compete in a competition, generally in the US. At the end of the school year, there's an international Dairy Challenge competition which is just the US and Canada. I was fortunate enough to spend a week in California with Dr. Walton and a few other students to tour a bunch of mega dairy farms. At least at the time for me, they were mega dairy farms. I grew up on a 30-cow dairy farm, so to go to a 10,000-cow dairy farm in California was really eye opening. Getting to do that with John, who was just such a wonderful human being, was really something that stands out, as a highlight of my career for sure.

Would you say that that would be your favorite class, or did you have another favorite class during your time at the OAC?

I think that was probably my favorite class. It was incredibly unique in terms of what that course provides and having it be so experiential compared to so many other courses that are lecture based. That course basically didn't have lectures, it was just those farm visits and then the process of building those proposals, John would bring in industry experts to help walk students through how to do these pitches. You got to learn very directly from industry experts who were doing this on a day-to-day basis, nutritionists, people working for dairy genetic companies, general farm consultants who walked through the practical side. Of all the courses I had, it was the most fun, but it was probably also the one that was closest to industry. It was closest to where I saw myself going at the time, and where I ended up. I'm in a research capacity, but that experience, that learning, that grounding, as an industry researcher has really been incredibly valuable. I have that grounding largely because of that course - learning what matters on a farm and how do farmers think about their decisions and that's really influenced how I think about things in my career.

When you first arrived at the OAC, what was your first interaction like? Did you commute first year, or did you live on campus?

I lived on campus; I was in Addington. I lived in a general biology cluster, so not really living with other OAC students, but again, because of my 4-H background, I knew a lot of the Aggies, so I spent most of my first year in the Aggie cluster. Even though I wasn't living there with them, all my Wednesday nights were at the Aggie Pub and my Friday, Saturday nights when I was still on campus, were spent in the Aggie Cluster and with that group of people. Most of my studying was spent there as well. Not that I didn't have good relationships and friendships where I was living, but I spent a lot of time with that core group of people. It made the transition from high school a lot easier to have that group. To an outsider, it can be seen as very cliquey, and I think it is or it was at the time, I shouldn't speak for now. At the same time, it fostered this really unique sense of belonging and kinship with other people who are going through the same experience.

Were you involved in any other extracurricular activities at the school or any clubs?

I was fairly active through my time. I was on the SFOAC (Student Federation of the Ontario Agricultural College) for a few years as the animal biology representative. I was the VP external on SFOAC in my 4th year and then I was also on the College Royal Society I think all four years, but certainly at least three of my years at Guelph. I was there during the great coat check fiasco of College Royal Ball. This was a very big event. The College Royal Ball used to be the event of the calendar year, not just within the OAC, but across the whole campus. The entire UC was a dance where every major room was its own themed party that had its own bar. There were different themes and different bands, there'd be a band in the Brass Taps, a band in the basement, and there'd be a band up in the grad club. There were also other rooms with DJ music and dancing. It was a huge event but the thing that led to its demise was that the ball was held in early February, peak winter. The coat check at the ball was always something we used as a fundraiser for some other club at the university. We took bids and a club would put together a proposal of how they were going to run coat check and we would allow them to do so. That club would make their profit from the coat check and take it for their club activities. The year that the College Royal Ball died was the height of the peacoat being in fashion. Everyone on campus had a black peacoat, especially if they were going to go to a ball. They would wear it right over a dress or a suit, it was the plain black peacoat. In the mad dash, when everyone's coming to the ball at the same time, it was a really snowy night, and the weather was bad. Every person brought in their black peacoat to go to the coat check, but they stopped putting numbers on the hangers. You had 3000 black peacoats on hangers with no way of knowing whose was whose. I remember this vividly because everyone who was on College Royal Society ended up having to help at the end of the night. I had been partying all night as one does, and then having to try to sort out all these different coats and everyone coming to the window and saying "well, it's a black peacoat", Thanks, we have 2,000 of them. I'd ask are there any other identifying features? Usually, the answer was no. We were there

till 6:00am trying to find people's coats for them. Maybe 10% of people went home with their own coat, they just went home with a coat that vaguely fit them. People were very upset. The next year we couldn't sell tickets to the ball because everyone was so upset at what had happened, no one even bought tickets and that was the end of College Royal Ball.

**Were there any other things that you liked to do socially on campus?
Did you have a favorite spot that you would go with friends?**

I did most of the aggie activities, I was at Aggie Pub most weeks. I played a lot of extracurricular sports, that was another nice part about OAC culture is that there was always a team. If you wanted to play soccer, there was an OAC team and probably one for each class as well as a hockey team and volleyball team. I really enjoyed that, that filled a lot of evenings and a lot of Sundays.

Which teams were you a part of?

At the time we had an OAC hockey team, a three-pitch team, a soccer team, an indoor volleyball team, a beach volleyball team and a water polo team. Those are the ones I can remember at the very least that I played on.

What would be your favorite memory, something that really stood out? I know you've already mentioned the class and the College Royal Ball but what else stuck out to you?

That's a good question. The one definitive memory I have of intramurals specifically is one year we had a very good soccer team, and I am not a good soccer player, so I was very much the worst player on the soccer team. In the men's elite intramural soccer division, there was a team of ex-varsity soccer players and some profs like Alfons Weersink, he was a prof in economics. We managed to beat them in the finals of the intramural soccer league and one of the guys on this ex-varsity team was one of my roommates in first year, so there was another component of the rivalry. But that's one moment that I'll always remember, at least from the intramural side of things. In terms of big memories, I'm trying to stick to my undergrad experiences for the most part. It is the sum of all the experiences, Aggie pubs, Aggie Curling bonspiels and those sorts of things. Just being in a community where everyone leaned into everything. Being able to be with the group who dressed up to the theme and everything was 110% all the time. That's the thing I really look back fondly on, just being in a community that was always doing things 110%.

For your own personal academic success, would you say that there's a memory that's stuck out? Perhaps some exam that you went into, weren't sure about and you just did amazing on. Or even when you graduated, the feeling that you had, knowing that you accomplished this, was that something that also sticks out to you?

It's a good question, a very good question. I was fortunate enough that I did quite well academically. There was a moment, second year quantitative genetics, which was not an agriculture course, but I already made the switch into agriculture. I was thinking where do I want to go with my life, and my career? I had done really well in courses like chemistry and calculus in first year and that's how my brain generally works. Sitting in those quantitative genetics class and finding that clear bridge between the things I was good at, math and quantitative sciences, and those things I was passionate about such as agriculture and the dairy industry and finding that bridge. Seeing quantitative genetics as the place where these two things clearly fit together and where I can fit. I can remember that little light bulb of "this is where I belong, this is what I'm supposed to do." That's what my master's and my PhD are in and I'm now actually a corn breeder. I was a dairy cattle breeder for eight years and now I'm working as a corn geneticist.

Do you have any friends that you are still close with that you met during your time with the OAC?

I do, most of my closest friends are friends from university. A lot of them are non-OAC as I got into later years. I found friends with similar interests and things outside of class and inside of work. But there's still tons of Aggie friends that I still stay in contact with. Most of my closest friends are ones that I met at the OAC. Just a month ago I got back from a trip to Nova Scotia with a friend who I met in the OAC and we're still very close friends.

You don't have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable, but were there any really difficult or challenging times? If so, how did you overcome that or did you go to any resources at the university to help you?

I'm struggling to think of something obvious that comes to mind with that question. I am very fortunate to not come up with something in the moment around that. It's very lucky to feel that way. The closest would have been in that first year where I realized I didn't really belong, or at least that I wasn't on a path that I felt comfortable with anymore and going to academic counselling. That was incredibly helpful it helped me see a path forward and a path to where I wanted to be. I am fortunate enough to not have felt the need at the time to exploit any of those resources. Now I'm sure they would have been helpful, as I've matured as an individual, I've realized the value of those kind of resources that I probably didn't see when I was younger. I had bad marks, I had

breakups and I had normal things, I had human experiences, but none kind of imprinted on me to a point where at this moment they feel defining. I didn't have any defining negative moments in that time of my life, which is very fortunate.

Do you have any photos that you're willing to share?

I do have some, I'll do some digging when I have a bit of time later this week and see what I can send to you, but I'm sure if I go back to my Facebook profile from that time that there's lots, because that was kind of peak Facebook. There are probably thousands, just finding appropriate ones to send will be the only challenge there.

If you had something else that would be the most crucial takeaway or message you think the OAC presented to you? Not necessarily in an academic or career sense, but maybe in a life model, some words of wisdom.

There's lots of these messages that are cliché, but the older I get, the more I realized the clichés are there for a reason. As I think about the success I've had since my time in OAC, the stuff I did in class and learning how to learn was important, but the things I did outside of class to become a much more well-rounded human were also important. To learn the requisite social skills, to learn how to adapt to different situations, to extend myself outside of my comfort zone has served me much better than any of the time I spent in class. It really is, learning how to learn, and learning how to adapt, learning how to be self-aware and self-reflective. Those were the things that the OAC really helped instill in me. How to think differently outside the paradigm of how best to prepare for a test, that served me far better than anything I learned in class.

That's all the questions that I have here. So again, I want to thank you for your time. I don't want to hold you up any longer, but I really appreciate it.