



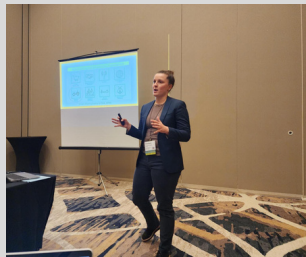
THE CULTIVATED CONNECTION



September 2025 | Virginia Tech CALS

Graduate Student Spotlight

Highlighting our graduate students that have assisted in the facilitation and coordination of the Engaging Secondary Teachers in CALS Research for Agricultural Literacy. Our graduate students are available to visit with your students via Zoom and help answer any questions about implementing materials in your classroom.



Madisen Plunkert

PhD Student

Tell us about yourself and your background:

My name is Madisen Plunkert, and I'm from Hanover, Pennsylvania. I earned my undergraduate degree in Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management from Penn State, where I discovered my passion for environmental education and sustainable food systems. After several seasons of working as an environmental educator, naturalist, and greenhouse assistant manager, I pursued a master's in Education, Development, and Community Engagement at Penn State. There, I worked as a graduate teaching assistant and taught several sections as the lead instructor of undergraduate courses, where I strove to make lessons approachable, engaging, and applicable. My master's research focused on agricultural literacy in schools, aiming to foster an informed and agriculturally literate generation. At Virginia Tech, I continue to work as a graduate teaching assistant and build on my teaching skills and approach through the Graduate Teaching Scholars Program. For my dissertation, I plan to research the communal significance of local foods and cuisine and the relationship between these foods and community identity and development.

Why did you choose to work with the Professional Development in Agricultural Literacy (PDAL) Program?

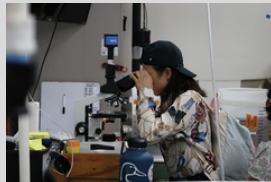
I chose Virginia Tech to work with Dr. Kim Niewolny and the Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation, whose research aligns closely with my interests in local foods, foodscapes, and community resilience. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of ALCE provides the ideal environment for expanding my understanding and engagement with agricultural education, community education and development, and extension. I was also impressed by the university's emphasis on service, as reflected in its motto, *Ut Prosim*, "That I may serve."

What is one interesting thing about you that people should know?

I can juggle and ride a bike with no handlebars, but not at the same time (yet)!

CALS CURRENTS

What's happening in VT CALS?



2025 Conference Recap!

A big thank you to everyone who attended the 2025 PDAL Conference! We truly appreciate your participation. Check out these amazing photos from the event!

Ready, Set, Grow!



Here is a free resource that can be utilized in your classroom:
[Agricultural Trends in America](#)

ANNOUNCEMENTS



Our graduate students are available to assist you!

For inquiries, contact Dr. Donna Westfall-Rudd at mooredm@vt.edu.

Interested in planning a campus visit? We'd be delighted to host you and your students! To schedule, please reach out to Karen Ealy-Sanders at kasande1@vt.edu.

Contact Us!

We'd love to hear from you! If you have questions about our programs or opportunities to engage with CALS please reach out to **Dr. Donna Westfall-Rudd** at mooredm@vt.edu or **Nia McLean** at mnia@vt.edu