

Theme music ([00:01](#)):

Please listen carefully.

Taylor Pardue ([00:06](#)):

Welcome to the NC State Philanthropy Podcast, telling the world how we Think and Do through the support of our friends, alumni and more. I'm your host, Taylor Pardue.

([00:17](#)):

On this episode, we're joined by Clyde Sorenson, an NC State alumnus, distinguished professor and donor, to discuss the impact of private support on his work and the university as a whole.

([00:31](#)):

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Sorenson. To kick things off, tell us a little bit about how you came to NC State and kind of bring us up to the modern day.

Clyde Sorenson ([00:55](#)):

Well, I'll be glad to do that, and thanks for the invite. So, I came to NC State as a freshman in 1976. NC State was one of only two places I applied, and the other place I applied, um, is about 20 miles west of here, and I won't mention the name.

([01:20](#)):

Anyway, I came to NC State because, even as a small child, I've always been fascinated by living things, particularly by animals of all flavors, and I got it in my head when I was in middle school that I wanted to be a biologist. And then, when I was in high school, I decided I wanted to be a wildlife biologist, and North Carolina State University had the best program in North Carolina, that I knew of anyhow, in wildlife. And so, that's what led me here.

([01:58](#)):

My dad was in the service. I was an Army brat, and we moved around a lot. I was born in New Mexico and lived in Hawaii and Pennsylvania and Texas before we moved to North Carolina when I was 10. So, you know, North Carolina's pretty much my home state — as close to a home state as I have.

([02:22](#)):

Anyway, so I came in 1976. I enrolled in the wildlife biology program. I got my bachelor's in wildlife in 1980. That led to a really cool internship that I did where I got to play with alligators and red-cockaded woodpeckers. And then I worked for a while for NIEHS [The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences] out in the Triangle, and I came back to NC State in 1981 to pursue my master's in entomology, having realized that it's a whole lot easier to get a job in entomology than wildlife biology, and also having realized that insects are wildlife. They're perhaps some of the most important wildlife, and in many ways, they're really underappreciated.

([03:12](#)):

So, I got my bachelor's in 1980. I got my master's in entomology in 1984. And then I pursued my Ph.D. in entomology as well and earned that in 1988. And then, from there, I worked for a short while here in a post-doc position, and then I went out West and worked on the faculty at the University of Nevada in Reno for almost four years, and then the faculty of the University of Missouri – Columbia at an off-campus research station for about four years before I got the chance to come back home.

([03:51](#)):

And so, I've been back at NC State on the faculty here since 1996, which seems like a really, really long time ago.

Taylor Pardue ([04:01](#)):

We were talking off-air about, again, the class that I took with you and how many students you've taught since then. You said it's up to about 8,000, give or take?

Clyde Sorenson ([04:08](#)):

It's over 8,000, yeah. So, I teach Insects and People, ENT 201, which is a science class for non-science majors, and I've been teaching it since 2000. And so, yeah, I've accumulated now over 8,000, almost 9,000 students in that class, which is one of the things I'm most proud of is how many folks I've managed to corrupt with an affection for insects.

Taylor Pardue ([04:38](#)):

Well, you said, was it the "flavor of wildlife" or "flavor"? One of the things that always stands out in my mind about your class was taste-testing some of the different bugs, like meal worms and things like that.

Clyde Sorenson ([04:52](#)):

Yeah. So, that's one of the units we cover in 201 is the subject of entomophagy. That's the practice of eating insects, which most of the world does. So, yeah, we have a unit on entomophagy, and as part of that unit, we bring food into the classroom, and we actually prepare some food in the classroom. I may have just got myself in trouble with that declaration. But yeah, we feed our students, our 201 students, we feed them "hush grubbys," which are hush puppies with meal worms in them, and we feed them "rice critter treats" and "chocolate-covered cricket clusters." And, recently, we've been also serving folks – I don't think you got the chance when you took the class – but we've been serving folks "Cajun-roasted super worms."

Taylor Pardue ([05:44](#)):

No, I would've remembered that.

Clyde Sorenson ([05:45](#)):

Yeah. That's probably the most daring thing that we serve, but ...

Taylor Pardue ([05:49](#)):

It's obviously a novelty. It sticks out in people's minds. It's informative. But, like you said, also, that's diversifying and broadening your mind about what the rest of the world is like. And, again, something that's overlooked. You know, they don't think of them as wildlife, certainly don't think of them as food, a food source. But, yeah, a very invaluable part of your class, I think.

Clyde Sorenson ([06:11](#)):

Yeah. So, yeah. One of the most important things we try and get across in that class is just how deeply embedded insects are in our cultural environment. And, you know, we are exceptional in this part of the world in not routinely eating insects. Most folks in the world eat insects, not because they have to, but because they like to.

Taylor Pardue ([06:34](#)):

That's true, too.

Clyde Sorenson ([06:34](#)):

Just like, you know, in a lot of other parts of the world folks might look a little ensconced at somebody eating a soft-shell crab sandwich.

Taylor Pardue ([06:42](#)):

Sure.

Clyde Sorenson ([06:42](#)):

You know, that's a pretty gnarly dish if you're not familiar with it. We have to kind of modify our attitudes, I think, a little bit and realize that most of the world regards insects, at least some insects, as really top-drawer noshing.

Taylor Pardue ([07:05](#)):

So, kind of switching gears from that, building on it. It's a nice segue, too. What are you working on now, or teaching now, as well? What does your role look like?

Clyde Sorenson ([07:13](#)):

Yeah. So, my role; I've got a lot of roles. My primary responsibility is teaching, and I teach my undergraduate class, 201. I teach it both spring and fall. I teach a large lecture section each semester, 140 in the fall and 160 in the spring. And I also, each semester, have about 80 or so students in the distance-ed section. And then I teach again, in the first summer session, I teach a distance-ed section of 201 as well.

([07:48](#)):

And then, beyond that, I teach several graduate courses. Every fall, I teach a graduate course in integrated pest management, which is the philosophy that drives most of our insect pest management programs nowadays. In alternate springs, I teach insect ecology as a graduate course. Every summer, I have a one-week course that we take to the mountains for our incoming entomology graduate students. We call it Insect Natural History and Field Ecology, and we spend a week up in the mountains basically having a lot of fun studying insects in the field. And then, in alternate summers – prior to COVID, anyhow – I also teach a 10-week field course called the Agricultural Entomology Practicum, where we spend a day in the field with one of our faculty members learning about what it is they do. And so, yeah, I teach a lot.

([08:58](#)):

One other thing that's coming back onto the table is, several years ago, I took a course, a class to Mexico to see the monarch butterflies and their over-wintering habitat, and we're finally getting to do that again this winter. So, between Christmas and New Year's, we'll be in Mexico seeing monarch butterflies in huge numbers and humpback whales and other cool stuff.

([09:24](#)):

So, I teach a lot. And then, beyond that, I do have some research responsibilities. For most of my career here at NC State, I've worked in agricultural pest management, primarily on tobacco and other field crops. Over the last, I'd say eight or nine years, a lot of my research has been more in the vein of

conservation biology and looking at insect and plant relationships, primarily in the longleaf pine savannah ecosystems that we have here in North Carolina and the Sandhills and down on the coast.

(10:02):

So, we've done some really cool things. We've looked at the reproductive ecology of endangered plants on Fort Bragg. We've spent about four years doing some really cool work on the reproductive ecology of the Venus fly trap and now I've got a graduate student, a Ph.D. student, who is studying the ants that live in the tree canopies in temperate forests here. They've been heavily studied in the tropics, but we know almost nothing about what kind of ants you might find in trees here. And so, she's been working on that for three years now through COVID. She's done great, and we're learning some really cool things — like some ants pretty much only stay in the trees Yeah.

Taylor Pardue (10:54):

Outta sight outta mind kind of thing.

Clyde Sorenson (10:55):

And so, you know, in the tropics, those canopies have really important ecological roles to play. And so, we're just in the earliest stages of trying to figure out what they do here.

Taylor Pardue (11:06):

OK.

Clyde Sorenson (11:06):

And then the last major component of my job, one that I'm hopefully going to pass off to somebody else in the next year or so, is that I'm the director of graduate programs for the entomology program. So, it's my responsibility to make sure our graduate students get admitted properly and then progress well as they go through their graduate programs here in our department.

Taylor Pardue (11:36):

Well, and I know, unofficially, but just another hat that you kind of wear is extension working with the extension program. Not directly, but sort of as a liaison, maybe the right word of

Clyde Sorenson (11:50):

So, yeah. So, I don't have a formal extension appointment. I imagine most folks that know anything at all about CALS know we've got this three-part mission. We've got teaching, research and extension, and many folks have formal appointments in extension. I don't have a formal appointment in extension, but I do a lot of outreach and science communication, and I do support the extension program when I'm needed. I think a really important job for anybody on a faculty of a land-grant institution is to try and communicate science to the public, and so, I spend a fair amount of time doing that kind of thing.

Taylor Pardue (12:37):

I think, we're talking about the three-pronged part of CALS and then your time as a student, too, doing all three degrees here. I think that has always fascinated me about your story is how involved you've been with all the aspects of campus life.

Clyde Sorenson (12:51):

Yeah. So, I mean, over the course of my academic career, I've had appointments in all three of those major missions. I was 100% extension when I was in Nevada. I was 50% research, 50% extension when I was in Missouri. I was hired here at 100% research, and now I'm 90% teaching. So, yeah, I've kind of gotten all of the exposure, and I'm kind of unusual in that I did get all three of my degrees here at NC State. But the thing is, the thing that that kind of inspires me to want to support this institution, is that pretty much everything good in my life is an outgrowth of my time here at NC State as a student, and then, certainly over the last, let me say it again, 26 years on the faculty here.

(13:45):

So, you know, I got an education that allowed me to pursue the career that I wanted to pursue. I've really enjoyed working at all the places that I've worked, but working at NC State's a real special thing for me. I met my wife while I was a student here working on my Ph.D. Between us, we have, I think, 17 years as students at NC State. So, if that doesn't mean something, I don't know what does. And, you know, I've had the opportunity to do a lot of things in my career and in my personal life that, again, you know, it all harkens back to the experiences I've had here at NC State.

Taylor Pardue (14:40):

I know it's been encouraging to me. I graduated with my undergrad from here, and now I'm working on my master's. And, you know, the conventional wisdom when I was here as an undergraduate is that academia wanted you to go to different universities for different degrees, and that would look better on a transcript and everything. But, to your point, like, I feel the same way about NC State. This is home. You know, I didn't want to go anywhere else. And that's, it's always been encouraging that, you know, you have had such a successful career even though you stayed. That's not a negative. When you know where you want to be, that's where you need to be.

Clyde Sorenson (15:12):

Well, yeah, There's a fair amount of truth to that. And, you know, in point of fact, it probably, for most folks, it probably does benefit to have a diversity of experiences. But I kind of got that diversity of experiences by going out West, and, you know, my wife was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and moved to North Carolina when she was 6. So, she, before we ever left North Carolina, she knew nothing much but North Carolina, and when we left to go to Nevada, we went the intention of, you know, perhaps spending an entire career there. But I got experiences there that broadened me. I got experiences in Missouri that broadened me. But I wouldn't have had any of those experiences if I hadn't received the education that I received here at NC State. You know, the education I got here was my ticket to getting there, which ultimately was my ticket to coming back here. So, again, you know, it's worked out really well for me. I have no complaints. There's really no place else in the world I'd rather work than NC State.

Taylor Pardue (16:39):

There you go.

Clyde Sorenson (16:40):

And it's, you know, it's been a real pleasure for the most part. It's, you know, it's still a job, right? There's still things you have to do that you don't necessarily want to do and things that you have to do that aren't necessarily all that much fun, but I'd say, you know, I've really gotten a tremendous amount out of being here, and I hope I've provided a tremendous amount back to the university.

Taylor Pardue (17:12):

So in recognition of all that, you're an Alumni Association Undergraduate Distinguished Professor. Tell listeners a little bit about what all goes into that, how it furthers your work and just all of the impact that it has on you.

Clyde Sorenson ([17:25](#)):

So, I was named an Alumni Association Distinguished Undergraduate Professor, I think, about seven or eight, maybe nine years ago, and, for me, it was a tremendous honor because, basically, what it is it's acknowledging, I suppose, my excellence in the classroom and the contributions I make through the teaching aspects of my position. And I'll be frank, teaching's the most fun I have in my job. I love my research, and I love being out in the field. But I'll be frank, you know, if it's the end of July and I've been in that same tobacco field 14 times already this summer, it's not nearly as much fun as it once was.

Taylor Pardue ([18:15](#)):

Fair enough. Yeah.

Clyde Sorenson ([18:16](#)):

But every day I go into a classroom, I have a good time, and I look forward to it. And so, you know, that honor was a recognition, you know, I guess, of the enthusiasm and, I suppose, the expertise that I bring to the classroom. And I have a hard time saying those things about myself because I can always be better, but I do think it's something that I certainly value.

Taylor Pardue ([18:49](#)):

Yeah. That's what I like about distinguished professorships is, you know, there's that humility on the side of the professor themselves, but it allows us to brag on you for you.

Clyde Sorenson ([19:01](#)):

I reckon. I reckon so. Yeah. Well, again, you know, and I tell my kids first day of class in 201, I say, "Look, this is the most fun I've ever had and been paid for it."

Taylor Pardue ([19:13](#)):

Yeah.

Clyde Sorenson ([19:14](#)):

Short of catching alligators, which was a little bit more fun, but did not pay near as well.

Taylor Pardue ([19:20](#)):

I'm sure, yeah. Makes sense.

Clyde Sorenson ([19:21](#)):

And I tell them, you know, "I'm gonna have a good time. I'm gonna enjoy my time in this classroom with you guys. And, you know, if you all buy into it a little bit, you're gonna have a good time, and you're gonna learn a lot, and maybe you're gonna come out of this class with a different attitude about these incredible little animals that surround us in almost every way." And that's what I tell them. I've been teaching that class for 22 years, and it's, I mean, first day of class this semester was just as exciting to me as the first day of class 22 years ago when I started teaching it. So, I love being in the classroom. I love

interacting with students. I love seeing light bulbs go off. So, I guess if all that means I'm a distinguished professor, I'll take it.

Taylor Pardue ([20:30](#)):

On today's Philanthropy 101 segment, we're talking about crowdfunding. Being part of the Wolfpack means no one has to solve a problem alone. The strength of the Pack is always there to back an extraordinary effort. NC State has always been a place where bold thoughts inspire even actions. This is what our students learn and what they bring into the world. Every big idea starts somewhere, and we make sure they have a place to grow.

([20:55](#)):

NC State Crowdfunding is a new way we're thinking big and getting things done thanks to the power of the Pack. This platform connects alumni, friends, family and community members with causes they're passionate about, and helps our students, faculty and staff bring their ideas to life for the benefit of our university, our state and beyond.

([21:17](#)):

For more information on how you can be part of NC State Crowdfunding, please visit crowdfunding.ncsu.edu. Now, back to the show.

([21:28](#)):

You were talking about being in the field and all that, and I just couldn't help but think, you can accomplish in and of yourself a lot through research, but these 8,000 people — more than that, I'm sure, through other classes and different things — but all that research and all that field experience you've touched through them where they've gone on from there and just, you know, extrapolated on out how many lives you've impacted.

Clyde Sorenson ([21:59](#)):

Yeah. That's one of the great joys of my life is how many folks have been introduced to the science of entomology as a sophomore or maybe a junior, or maybe even a freshman in that science course for non-science majors who have then gone on to pursue graduate education in entomology with having no understanding of what it was before they took that class but flipping the switch in those students that allows them to see that might be what they want to pursue as a career.

Taylor Pardue ([22:37](#)):

Sparking in that interest, yeah.

Clyde Sorenson ([22:39](#)):

So, over the years, I know at least 30 or 40, if not, I don't know, at least, because I don't know what happens to many of the students after they leave my classroom, but I know at least 30 or 40 students got their introduction to entomology in that class and went on to not only graduate education in entomology but really brilliant careers in entomology. So, I mean, one of my 201 students was a Park Scholar in geology.

Taylor Pardue ([23:11](#)):

Oh wow. OK.

Clyde Sorenson [\(23:11\)](#):

She ended up getting a Ph.D. in entomology, and she's got a great career in industry. And another one of my students took 201 as a distance-education student, and she was one of the valedictorians at this institution, and she ended up getting her Ph.D. with me working on a project with me, and now she's on the faculty at Virginia Tech. There are lots and lots of those stories, and those are the stories that make me the happiest because then I really do feel like I'm making a profound difference in somebody's life.

[\(23:54\)](#):

But at the same time, I frequently get random emails from somebody that took a class maybe when you took it in 2011, and they'll send me a picture of an insect and say, "What is this?" Or they'll drop me an email and say, "Hey, I saw this really cool critter. It reminded me of you and how much I enjoyed that class." And when you get that kind of thing, it's kind of hard to hate your job, too. You know, it's really gratifying. So, with having had almost 9,000 students, there's really no place I can go without bumping into former students now.

[\(24:35\)](#):

So, a little story on that. Several years ago, I went to a conference in, or, I'm sorry, I took a trip to Chile with my department head. Our intention was to try and establish a relationship with one of the universities down there. where we could maybe do some student exchanges and things like that. We had a great trip.

[\(25:01\)](#):

We were in the southern part of the country, and then we flew back to Santiago and we had most of the day before I was supposed to get on the airplane to come back to the States. We got back to the airport and found my flight had been canceled, and we were gonna spend the whole day goofing around Santiago, but I spent that whole day trying to get on another airplane so I could get home in the airport. I finally got all those arrangements made, and I was, by the time I was getting ready to board that airplane, I was in a pretty, I'll say, foul mood because I lost a day and it was stressful.

[\(25:41\)](#):

I was just about to hand my ticket to the young lady that was taking the tickets at the gate, and somebody behind me said, "Hey, Doc Sorenson." In Santiago, Chile? Really? And I turned around, and there was one of my former students from a semester before getting on the same airplane. Turns out he played club soccer in Chile. So, yeah, I basically can't go anywhere without bumping into former students. And that's really cool, too, you know?

Taylor Pardue [\(26:15\)](#):

Yeah. That's gotta be an unreal feeling. And I'm sure that brightened your day.

Clyde Sorenson [\(26:19\)](#):

Oh, my attitude completely changed. In fact, I've got a picture on my computer of me and him standing at the airplane door, both of us grinning like mules eating briars and having a big old time. All those students and all the graduate students that have taken my graduate classes and all the students that I've mentored as a primary advisor in their graduate studies, that's the legacy of any professor, and I hope I have a robust legacy.

[\(27:00\)](#):

So, one of the things related to that is that, you know, I've had a great time in my career teaching here, and I benefited from a remarkable mentor in teaching: a fellow named Ron Kuhr, who came to NC State

while I was a graduate student to be the department head of the Department of Entomology. And then, by and by, he moved up into higher administration in CALS, and while I was gone out wandering out West, he got tired of administration and said he wanted to finish his career teaching. And so, he came back to the department, and he started 201 on a bet with the dean that it wouldn't fly.

Taylor Pardue ([27:47](#)):

Oh, wow.

Clyde Sorenson ([27:48](#)):

But, of course, it did fly. But when I came back to join the faculty, he was one of my original mentors both in teaching, but also in general in establishing my academic career here.

([28:05](#)):

He was a really wonderful fellow and a really good teacher, and he saw in me, I think, the potential that I could be a really good teacher. And he was the one that encouraged me to eventually gravitate away from a really heavy research commitment to a much heavier teaching commitment. And then, of course, like does happen to people that you care about, he passed away a few years ago before his time – he was an older fellow, but before his time – and his widow and friends and family established an endowment, and I was part of that initial establishment. And the whole point of this long, complicated story is to get to the end point of that endowment and the endowment that my wife and I have established. The goal of both of these is to foster excellence in teaching, particularly in the students that are the graduate students that are leaving our program.

Taylor Pardue ([29:26](#)):

OK.

Clyde Sorenson ([29:27](#)):

So, we want, through these vehicles, we want to enhance the training of teachers. There are lots of mechanisms for recognizing and enhancing research productivity, but we want some of our graduates from this program to be really excellent teachers. And so, both of these endowments are set up to support fellowships to help graduate students – Ph.D. students, primarily – gain deeper and more significant teaching experience that will make them more competitive for teaching positions as they leave here and go out into the wide world.

Taylor Pardue ([30:07](#)):

OK. And the names of those two, the official names in case anyone will allow to give to support those.

Clyde Sorenson ([30:13](#)):

Yeah, so the [Ronald J. Kuhr Memorial Scholarship & Entomology Graduate Teaching Award](#) is one of them, and then the Lee and Clyde Sorenson Entomology Teaching Assistant Endowment. And, basically, we're gonna be using both of these – we already are using them – to support enhanced graduate student teaching experiences. And, you know, in the grand scheme of things, if they were to grow large enough, I wouldn't mind seeing down the road, you know, a Kuhr Endowment or a Kuhr Chair. In, in teaching we have lots of programs that support excellence and research. We need more programs that support and develop excellence in, in teaching. And so that's sort of where we're aiming our efforts anyway.

Taylor Pardue ([31:12](#)):

OK. We'll include links to both of those in the show notes and hopefully listeners will help contribute with that. But,

Clyde Sorenson ([31:19](#)):

Yeah, so, at some point, I'm gonna try and get in touch with some of those 8,000, 9,000 students and see if every one of them kicked in 10 bucks, we'd be in pretty good shape.

Taylor Pardue ([31:30](#)):

Honestly. Yeah. That's exciting.

Clyde Sorenson ([31:31](#)):

We'd be making some headway. So, but yeah, I've loved my time here. You know, it's obvious that I've got fewer years in front of me than I have behind me in my career here, but this is a magnificent institution in lots of ways. It's like every other place; it's got its issues and problems, but I think it's a really fine school. It's done really fine by me. It's provided me most of the good things in my life in one way or another, and I want to see it continue to succeed and grow.

Taylor Pardue ([32:23](#)):

We're happy to have you here on campus, but I'm especially happy to have had you here on the podcast today. I saw you earlier this year at the Pullin Society induction, which honors planned giving, and you mentioned the endowment you and your wife were giving to. I saw you and I thought, I know he is a distinguished professor, and now he is a planned giver. I was like, I've gotta have him on the podcast. So, great to have you here today and get to catch up.

Clyde Sorenson ([39:00](#)):

Glad to do it. It has been a lot of fun.

Taylor Pardue ([39:08](#)):

To learn more about Dr. Sorenson's groundbreaking work here at NC State, please visit go.ncsu.edu/sorenson, spelled S-O-R-E-N-S-O-N. If you'd like to hear even more stories of Wolfpack success, please subscribe to the NC State Philanthropy Podcast today in the Apple or Google Podcast stores, on Spotify or through Stitcher. Be sure to leave a comment and rating as well to let us know how we're doing. Thanks for listening, and as always, go Pack.