

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.

([00:21](#)):

On this episode, we're joined by James B. Robertson to discuss the Goodnight Scholar Program, which he was a member of as an undergraduate here at NC State, and the Goodnight Doctoral fellowship program, which he is currently a member of.

([00:33](#)):

Thanks so much for joining us today, James. To kick things off, just tell listeners a little bit about yourself and what first brought you to NC State.

James B. Robertson ([00:51](#)):

Yeah, so, as I was introduced, I'm James Robertson. I'm currently a doctoral student in the Department of Statistics here at NC State. That has become a large portion of my identity at this point, in the way that graduate school does. What originally brought me to NC State, what is it, 10 years ago-ish, give or take, it feels like. So, it feels so recent for it to be so long ago, but then when I was in high school, I was very much of the opinion that I wanted to be an engineer and why exactly was sort of the way that a lot of people end up in the direction of engineering, which is excelling in mathematics and sciences and having an interest in these and being sort of told that this is the career for people who like math and science, this is sort of what you do.

([01:47](#)):

But in high school, I also took an AP statistics class, which I found very wonderful, totally enthralling, and because of that I was applying to NC State's Industrial and Systems Engineering, because it was the engineering with the most statistics. Looking back on it now, it's sort of silly going for the engineering with the most statistics rather than just statistics, but I got there eventually. That NC State was pretty much the top of my list, but really it was, I was only applying to two schools: I was applying to MIT just because and NC State because I thought that it would be a good fit and a good match, and I would enjoy going there. I got into NC State, didn't get into MIT. I'm perfectly satisfied with that outcome, both then and now. And then also got invited to apply for the Goodnight Scholarship — well, the Goodnight Scholars program — in undergraduate. It's sort of an amusing anecdote that, at the time that I was doing my essays and applying, I did not realize that this was a full-ride scholarship that I was applying for; that I was viewing it totally just as a scholars program, a pool of peers to be involved in. And then whenever I was awarded it, my mom was looking up more materials. She was like, "Did you know that you just got a full-ride scholarship?" And I said, "No, no, I did not. I had no idea."

Taylor Pardue ([03:13](#)):

it was the best nice surprise you could have probably had.

James B. Robertson ([03:16](#)):

Yeah it was a very good surprise. I think my mom and I were talking about this some years ago, and I think that also my class of Goodnight Scholars was the first class where it was really a full-ride

scholarship. So, there may have also been some misunderstanding, confusion from the changeover in that process, but I think it was mostly me not reading the page that hard.

Taylor Pardue ([03:41](#)):

But once you saw it on the page, you couldn't turn away, I'm sure.

James B. Robertson ([03:44](#)):

Yeah, that's a game-changer. That is a game-changer. I was very excited about that. Very excited about the idea of not having to worry about the finances of the matter because my mom, she's an entrepreneur and she's a veterinarian, has her own practice, and at the time was still sort of very much in the process of building her practice and making it profitable. So, we were never strong in our savings accounts, so there was not savings or anything available for college. So, it was mostly going to be loans and any scholarships that I could scrape together, and then turn out that you just had to scrape one really nice scholarship and one really nice program, and that took very good care of us, and then also made it more possible for my younger brother to get more assistance when he went to college because then there was more time for saving because it wasn't being spent actively. So, it was a very large welcome surprise that made a very big impact on my family.

Taylor Pardue ([04:47](#)):

I'm sure. So, you've got that weight off your mind now, off your family's mind. Talk about your undergrad experience here and what that allowed you to do since you didn't have to worry about maybe a part-time job, I guess.

James B. Robertson ([05:00](#)):

Yeah. Well, the Goodnight Scholars program was part of my undergraduate experience from day one that the financial aspect quickly was able to be left by the wayside, that when it's something that you don't have to worry about, you don't constantly think about how you're not worrying about it, that you start to just live more in the moment and not worry about such things. But that, from the first day, as soon as we first moved on to campus, that there were Goodnight Scholars events for us to get us interacting as a cohort, get us engaged with each other, and those were [a] very big deal because it meant immediately getting integrated into the community, immediately having friends and like-minded peers, that being involved in the Goodnight Scholars program even from day one was fantastic because it's a group of highly motivated and generally just straight-up cool people to be involved with.

([05:58](#)):

Just about every Goodnight Scholar that I know agrees that the Goodnight Scholars are some of the coolest people that you'll ever meet, and then they very quickly and hastily say that they're not particularly counting themselves among that number, that trying not to seem, not to seem too arrogant or hubristic, but that we've got really wonderful peers, and continuing to interact with them is great. But the programs all through undergrad were very influential, too; that they had really impactful leadership and professional development programs, which spanned everything from résumé workshops to home-buying advice. There was one year that they had sort of an adulting 101 series where they had people come and just sort of talk about things that would help you eventually transition to adult life. Things like buying houses and what it really means to do your taxes and why you should probably get a tax accountant to do it. All sorts of things like that. My undergraduate felt very relaxed a lot of times, aside from all the stresses of classes, but that it was definitely not a lot of worry because they didn't have to worry about the monetary aspect, wasn't losing time to part-time jobs that would detract from time for

academics and time for sociality. It's upsetting the balance there. So, it, a lot of it was very impactful for both integrating into a really good community that I stayed strong with the whole way through.

Taylor Pardue ([07:34](#)):

It really does. The more you talk about it, the better and better the deal gets. A scholarship is great. A full-ride scholarship is great. Sense of community is great, the extracurriculars and then all these adult life training things — any of them in and of themselves is great, but you put them all together, that really does ... a full-suite program.

James B. Robertson ([07:56](#)):

It being a full program was very, very influential and very transformative. It's the reason that I am the adult that I am today, that going into college, you're really a high schooler for a good little while, while you're still in college.

Taylor Pardue ([08:10](#)):

It's a good way of putting it, yeah.

James B. Robertson ([08:10](#)):

There's a lot of maturing that goes on, and being part of such a good community, just full of good, strong-minded people and good strong-minded professional staff, was really influential for making sure that that development, that growing was happening in a very productive direction.

Taylor Pardue ([08:28](#)):

And like you said, from day one.

James B. Robertson ([08:29](#)):

From day one.

Taylor Pardue ([08:30](#)):

Yeah. So, you're not having to ...

James B. Robertson ([08:32](#)):

That it was within three hours of me moving in.

Taylor Pardue ([08:34](#)):

Wow. Is there anyone in particular that maybe you've met through the Goodnight program that's kind of stayed with you over the years?

James B. Robertson ([08:42](#)):

Yeah. I actually, I met my girlfriend through the Goodnight Scholars program. She was also class of 2018. We actually first really met at a Goodnight Scholars event, and I sort of just haven't been able to stop thinking about her since. So, that is another way that the Goodnight Scholars program has made a meaningful impact in the direction of my life.

Taylor Pardue ([09:05](#)):

Absolutely. So, obviously you spent your time here as an undergrad. How did that set you up for the master's program that you went on to as well?

James B. Robertson ([09:15](#)):

Yeah, so I was lucky enough to come in with some AP credits, able to knock a few GPs out — some of the ones that I was going to be less excited to be taking again — which opened up some free time for me in my schedule, which meant that really I decided that I'd start taking master's classes before graduation. And in part, that's also tied back to the economics of it because I wasn't in a hurry to graduate. There wasn't an associated cost or detriment to sticking around a little bit longer. So, I took a fair number of master's classes. I think between my undergraduate and the master's coursework, I think I took just about every master's class that NC State had to offer, in statistics specifically. It set me up very clearly and very well for that: for not being too worried about getting out as fast as I could, able to slow down, take my time, got a minor in Spanish, too.

([10:14](#)):

Love the language, love the classes. I'm still, I'm thinking about auditing some of them right now because graduate students get one free audit per semester, and it set me up very well for that. Being able to get through all my required coursework, get through additional supplementary coursework that I'm doing just for fun and a minor that a minor is just for fun. And then also having time to fill in my schedule more with graduate-level classes to expand my education, deepen my understanding and my knowledge. And then, from there, apply to NC State's master's program; transfer somewhere around, half the credits that I accumulated for the master's classes were able to transfer in and then had just one semester of master's classes. I think a summer and fall semester.

([11:02](#)):

And then, from there, just transition into the working world back to back, lickety split. At that point, I was definitely well worn of school. I've generally enjoyed school all my life, and I think that that remained true then, too, but that, I think I was 23 at that point, and I was sort of the mind, maybe I was 22, sort of the mind that I had spent whole time since I was five years old in school, so that I thought I would go get a taste of the working world and that in the master's program, too, there were peers who were a little bit older, had gone, worked and were coming back for a master's degree, and that they generally seemed to be more clearly motivated in their questions, tended to be sort of diving deeper into the material, asking more deep-driving questions.

([11:56](#)):

So, I thought that there'd be a lot of value to taking a similar approach: practicing statistics for a little while before continuing to study it further. And as soon as I left with my master's and was going to the working world, I knew I was going to come back. I was saying to Professor Zen and saying to my family that I was going to be in the working world for somewhere between three and five years, and then I would definitely be back because I'm not done with the field; that there's still a lot of learning left that I want to do.

Taylor Pardue ([12:27](#)):

It almost sounds like, in a way, a study-abroad program. Just kind of that horizon-broadening and getting that full-fledged living experience and everything. And then, like you said, coming back. So, all of that is huge in and of itself, but kind of like we were saying about the Goodnight program being a whole suite, now you've come back to another Goodnight program.

James B. Robertson ([12:48](#)):

So, right after graduating with my master's, I got into the job hunt, and then later that year got a job with the College of Veterinary Medicine. It was very nice being able to take my time a little bit in the job search because there wasn't the pressure of debt screaming down on me, saying that I needed to pay it and I needed to pay it fast. So, I worked part-time at my mother's veterinary hospital for a little while while applying to various positions. Eventually ended up here at NC State working in the College of Veterinary Medicine again. [The] College of Veterinary Medicine is a very wonderful place that all the faculty I worked with, everyone I worked with there was so, so kind. They were all just such nice, understanding and empathetic people, and it was a very good and warm experience there. And that was, they started that in early, no, late 2019, around September.

([13:49](#)):

And then I stayed there for almost four years. It was this past July, so July of 2023 that I ended up leaving that position so I could come back and be a graduate student full time, be a doctoral student full time, because there is a lot of work; that being in the working world is a lot of work, and that I didn't think that I wanted to balance being a student on top of that too much, and that it'd be a little bit more quick, more time-efficient if I'm able to just focus on it and focus in on, and I wanted the change of pace, to get back to the sort of hard-driving questions that you get asked by professors in classrooms. And then, in my applying for the graduate program, for the doctoral program, I was also invited to be a Goodnight Doctoral Fellow, which very quickly rocketed NC State to the top of my list.

([14:46](#)):

That makes a big difference. Funding is what a Ph.D. is all about, to a degree that you've got to find funding somewhere because paying for a Ph.D. is not the way to go. The Goodnight Doctoral Fellowship, though it is not like a lot of other fellowships, and that it is meant to supplement your stipend, your income that you get from doing teaching assistantships or RA-ships, research assistantships, that you are expected to still be involved with what they call the graduate student support plan. And from there, get money on top of that to help sort of cushion you a little bit, give you a little bit less financial stress. It's really very, very nice because it's a mix of saving my time by meaning that I'm not spending as much time in a week grading; that I've got fewer hours associated with my teaching assistantship, and that I also then am with this decrease in hours. I'm not seeing a decrease in pay; that I'm able to still have the same pay, the same ability to support myself. And then that there's also a little bit on top with the Goodnight graduate or Goodnight Doctoral Fellowship. So, it's very, very nice in that way because it means that I can, again, focus more on classes, focus less on finances and on what can be a little bit of busy work at times that grading is not very glamorous. There's a reason they have TAs do it.

Taylor Pardue ([16:15](#)):

And, yeah, just the multiple benefits of that, kind of like with the undergraduate program and the Goodnight Scholars program there, ...

James B. Robertson ([16:23](#)):

And they've ...

Taylor Pardue ([16:23](#)):

... not just taking the stress off, but adding to the help that you get. You're not just breaking neutral, but yeah.

James B. Robertson ([16:30](#)):

Yeah. And they've also, they've kicked up to a speaker series. I think Randy Woodson was our inaugural speaker for it. He was the first one last semester. Every speaker has really felt like they've been giving very useful insights, not just into how to be a good graduate student, how to be a good doctoral candidate and these sorts of things, but also in how you can expand your impact beyond your final publication, beyond your dissertation; how you can take that dissertation and go somewhere and do something with it. There's been a lot of very interesting speakers with very good insights talking, too, about the hot topic right now: AI and artificial intelligence, large language models and the roles of those, not just in society, but in academia, too, and learning to think of artificial intelligence more as a collaborator or a tool rather than a replacement. And a lot of people are very much in a hurry, it seems, to have them — to replace themselves or replace others with artificial intelligence, but the current state of artificial intelligence is that artificial intelligence can beat every grandmaster at chess, period. That it wins. It's more perfect than humans are, but there is something that can beat an AI at chess, and that is a grandmaster being assisted by AI; that there's always a bigger fish, and the bigger fish is man, the tool-user. That the tool never, will never outpace us as long as we learn how to use it appropriately. And I thought that that was a really interesting talk and insight to be giving to people who are quickly launching themselves into this new academic world.

Taylor Pardue ([18:20](#)):

Definitely a more realistic view of that emerging field versus, like you said, some people see it as all or nothing, it's a total replacement or don't use it at all, versus what it is: a tool. Jumping back just a little bit, but just an aside: It did not click when you said "late 2019," getting into the job force. What a time to ... little could you have known, but I'm glad to hear that you were able to get that work experience in a weird time, but also that you had caring, empathetic coworkers and everything at that time. That would be a terrible, worst-case scenario: to jump into the job market and then being in a bad position.

James B. Robertson ([19:01](#)):

I was very quickly finding myself having worked from home longer than I had worked in the office. I think I was in the office for something like six months, and then very quickly was out of the office for another year and a half, two years, something like that, before everyone was brought back to campus. I think it was summer 2022 that everyone was really brought back to campus, though it might've been 2021. That timeline I'm a little less certain on.

Taylor Pardue ([19:31](#)):

So, obviously you have many skills and you're getting even more training. Kind of tell a little bit about where you think you might go from here, whether that's in academia or private industry.

James B. Robertson ([19:42](#)):

Yeah. I think I would enjoy continuing in academia, that I very much enjoy all of the challenging and hard problems that faculty are asking us to solve. These problems that we're being asked to solve are not hard in the sense of the field, but they're hard for our current knowledge level in the field; that as we are sort of coming into our own as fully thinking, fully contributing academics in our own. But that this sort of question-answering paradigm, I think, is very enjoyable and that I have historically very much enjoyed and had, I think, some skill for teaching; that I've generally seen good success in helping others pick up and understand course material. Last semester, I was teaching in front of a classroom to a

degree as a flip class, so more person-to-person interaction than person-to-classroom interaction, but that I very much enjoy the teacher interaction being on the teacher side of it.

[\(20:51\)](#):

So, I still need to get my feet wet a little bit more with research before I can be totally sure, but I think that I would enjoy going in a faculty direction, and I've talked with some current faculty at NC State to sort of help me figure out what that looks like; how I can start getting set up going that way.

Taylor Pardue [\(21:09\)](#):

Sure.

James B. Robertson [\(21:09\)](#):

That all of the professors in the Statistics department are very open to meeting with people and talking about things that matter to them, like the state of professorship and academia and how to be a good peer in academia. So, that is my current sort of thought and direction, though I may end up going back into industry. That I think, if I end up back in industry, I'll probably be working more in a collaborative and consulting sense, similar to how I was doing in the College of Veterinary Medicine, but that even if I stay in academia, I think I'll probably still be doing that, too. That I find it to be very enriching and fulfilling work.

[\(21:55\)](#):

I got into statistics not just because of the love of the mathematics of it, which sort of what cropped up in high school, but that then in college, too, seeing more and more of it as a way to learn about other fields. A professor of mine once said, Dr. Emily Griffith, she said that we get to play in everybody's backyards; that we get a little bit of knowledge about everything, that we sort of get to jump straight to the cutting edge in a lot of research that we never, we as statisticians don't spend time learning things in the fundamentals. I don't know what a glial cell is, but I've learned some things about more the cutting edge of biology and anatomy and medicine without that knowledge at all. And then, it's fun. It's fun to get to sort of cheat your way straight to the exciting part. So, I think I'll probably end up doing consulting in some form or other, but I think ... right now, I have, my feeling is that academia would be a good direction, whether that's as a teaching professor, a research professor, or we also in the Department of Statistics have at least one professor of the practice, which is more in a consulting direction.

Taylor Pardue [\(23:08\)](#):

OK. I will say, hearing you talk about teaching — a passion for teaching is a special thing, a passion for a chosen career field as some applied version of that, in this case being statistics. That's a special thing, but to have both, that is a very unique pairing, so that's exciting for you, the different possibilities that it opens up.

James B. Robertson [\(23:34\)](#):

Yeah. Yeah. It opens a lot of doors. I'm a person of many passions, so the challenge will be filling them all in my finite lifespan.

Taylor Pardue [\(23:45\)](#):

Shameless plug, but I will say there are Goodnight professorships here at NC State, too, but if not, there's also a very wonderful tech company down the road as well. If listeners ...

James B. Robertson ([23:58](#)):

A tech company famous for how well they treat their employees.

Taylor Pardue ([24:03](#)):

And working in AI now, so that's an interesting tie-in, too. Thanks again for joining us today, James, and all the best as you finish up this latest degree. It's been really interesting to hear you talk about your journey so far through NC State, and we just wish you all the best as you go out into whichever career field you end up choosing.

James B. Robertson ([24:20](#)):

Yeah, thank you. It's been my pleasure to come and talk about it. It's not every day that somebody just wants to hear your story.

Taylor Pardue ([24:27](#)):

Well, we really enjoyed it. I'm sure listeners will as well.

James B. Robertson ([24:29](#)):

Yeah.

Taylor Pardue ([24:29](#)):

Thanks again.

James B. Robertson ([24:31](#)):

Yeah, thanks, Taylor. And I'd also like to give a special shout-out to Allison Medlin, the current director of the Goodnight Scholars program. She's currently celebrating 20 years at NC State, and she's been a model of professionalism and everything that the program could have asked for. So, big shout-out to her. Very big deal, and congratulations.

Taylor Pardue ([24:56](#)):

To learn more about Dr. Jim and Mrs. Ann Goodnight's impact on NC State, please visit [goodnight.ncsu.edu](http://goodnight.ncsu.edu) and [go.ncsu.edu/goodnight](http://go.ncsu.edu/goodnight). 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.