Science Societies

Bridge Scholars Program helps students build a scientific community

By Joy Drohan

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2026 Bridge Scholar Letiunasema Nuusila receives recognition during this month's CANVAS meeting in Portland, OR.

> For many students, attending a major scientific conference can be the first step toward building a professional network. The Agronomic Science Foundation's Bridge Scholars Program helps students, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, connect with mentors, peers, and career opportunities, creating relationships that can shape their future in agricultural and environmental sciences.

Viswanadh Sudarsanam, a 2026 Bridge Scholar, spent nearly 13 years working in the field with CIMMYT, part of the CGIAR network of research centers, in South Asia before coming to the U.S. for graduate school at Purdue University. He now studies sorghum starch quality under Mitch Tuinstra. Starting over in a country where he had no professional connections was daunting, he says.

His selection as a 2026 Bridge Scholar helped affirm that decision. “It tells me that the years I spent learning in the field carry value here too,” he says. “The word bridge in Bridge Scholars feels personal to me because my entire journey has been about connecting practical experience with deeper scientific understanding.”

Building the next generation of talent

In 2020, the Agronomic Science Foundation (ASF) started the IDEAS (Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity in Agricultural Sciences) Fund to pool resources with partners and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in agricultural and environmental science communities.

The fund supports, among other programs, the Bridge Scholars Program, which helps students like Sudarsanam connect with the Societies and their members.

“The [Bridge Scholars] program enables top talented students access to our Societies."

The program helps undergraduate and graduate students, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, participate in CANVAS and develop professional relationships. The program puts the Societies’ commitment to training the next generation into practice by helping students build relationships in their scientific community.

The Bridge Scholars Program has sponsored 43 students representing 29 universities across the country since its start in 2021.

“The program enables top talented students access to our Societies,” says Stella Salvo, chair of the Agronomic Science Foundation and head of breeding partnerships for smallholder farming at Bayer Crop Science. “It’s programming like this that creates the ability to strengthen our knowledge through relationships.”

Making the first meeting more accessible

The scholarship covers CANVAS meeting registration, lodging, and travel, and includes a one-year membership in the Societies. Scholars also receive one-on-one mentorship, a cohort of fellow scholars, access to professional development workshops and scientific sessions, and opportunities to connect with companies.



2021 Bridge Scholar Courtney Scott.

“Connecting with fellow scholars and mentors creates a unique professional development opportunity for students,” says Salvo.

Courtney Scott experienced the value of that support as a Bridge Scholar in 2021. Now in the final semester of her Ph.D. at the University of Georgia, she says attending that first conference helped her develop interpersonal skills and become more comfortable at conferences.

“I definitely feel like networking was a huge takeaway from that experience,” Scott says.

The other scholars gave her a built-in community with which to approach the meeting, helping her get to know members of the wider scientific community alongside students who were sharing the experience.



2026 Bridge Scholar Viswanadh Sudarsanam. Photo by Nicholas J. Roberts.

Growing into the Societies

At this month's CANVAS meeting in Portland, OR (November 1–4), Sudarsanam presented his research and met with colleagues across ASA, CSSA, and SSSA. Going into the meeting, his hope was that those conversations would strengthen his dissertation research and help him see where his career might lead.

He was especially looking forward to meeting his Bridge mentor, Dr. David Clay, professor of soil science at South Dakota State University, in person. Mentorship has shaped each stage of Sudarsanam's journey, he says, and he welcomes the opportunity to bring questions about a meaningful career in science to an experienced scientist.

Members of the Societies can help build these relationships by mentoring scholars and talking with them about their research and career goals. The scholarships bring students to the meeting; the people they meet help shape what they take away from it.

A researcher is born



2023 Bridge Scholar Kimberly Araya Guzmán.

Kimberly Araya Guzmán was a Bridge Scholar at the 2023 conference in St. Louis, MO. When she became the first Bridge Scholar from the University of Puerto Rico, she was working on a master's degree in soil fertility. She says the scholarship was "a huge opportunity and a huge blessing."

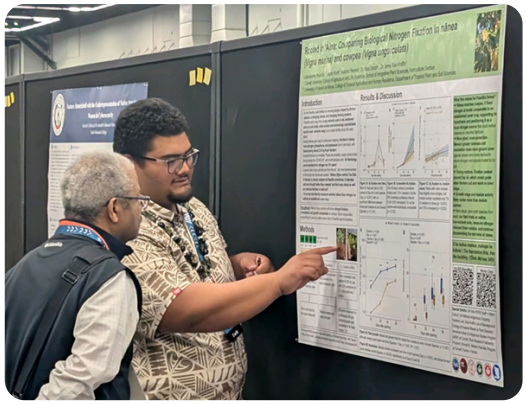
Her mentor was Luke Gataboni, professor and extension soil fertility specialist at North Carolina State University. They attended much of the conference together and he gave her many recommendations.

"Being a Bridge Scholar definitely influenced my decision to do a Ph.D," Araya Guzmán says. She had attended other conferences, but without the mentorship program, she had nowhere near the same kind of networking opportunities as she did with the Bridge program. "It was definitive for me. It set the groundwork for me to go for more."

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She is currently a Ph.D. student in soil ecology and soil microbiology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.



2026 Bridge Scholar Letiunasema Nuusil. Photo by AISES at Cornell.

Building lasting connections

Undergraduate Letiunasema Nuusila is another 2026 Bridge Scholar. As he was preparing to go to CANVAS this month, he was looking forward to the relationships that would begin in Portland.

“I'm excited to spend time with both seasoned and emerging professionals who share the same passion I do,” says Nuusila, who is a senior studying agricultural sciences at Cornell University. “Most of all, I hope to build connections that will last beyond my undergraduate years and into my professional career.”

For Sudarsanam, those connections are central to what he hopes to carry home. “I expect to leave Portland with a sharper research direction, stronger connections, and a clearer sense of the scientist I want to become.”

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