

Remembering a great mentor—Dr. Bill Raun

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In 2021, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA lost one of its giants—Dr. Bill Raun—who passed away on July 25, 2021, at the age of 64. Raun is remembered foremost as a mentor whose career centered on his students, guiding more than 100 graduate degree recipients from 22 countries. This article highlights his legacy as a mentor.

There are several measures to evaluate a scientist's contribution to science, including citation and other publication, awards and honors, research grants and funding, professional influence, and patents and innovations. However, the ever-lasting impact a

scientist makes through training and mentorship is often overlooked. This article is a personal note to commemorate our adviser and mentor, Dr. Bill Raun.

In 2021, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA lost one of its giants—Dr. Bill Raun—who passed away on July 25, 2021, at the age of 64. Dr. William “Bill” Robert Raun was born in Minden, NE, on July 21, 1957. He earned his bachelor of science degree in Agronomy from Oklahoma State University (OSU) in 1979 and master of science degree at OSU and in Agronomy under Dr. R. L. Westerman in 1982. He earned his Ph.D. in Agronomy with a minor in Biometry in 1985 at the University of Nebraska under Professor R. A. Olson and Dr. D. H. Sander.

In December 1985, he joined the wheat program in CIMMYT as a post-doctoral fellow based both in Texcoco and Ciudad Obregon, Mexico. After two years, he shifted to the maize program at CIMMYT in June 1987 as regional agronomist based in Guatemala City. His responsibilities included coordinating agronomic research trials for more than 41 national programs in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba. During this time, he also co-founded the journal *Agronomia Mesoamericana* (ISSN 1021-7444) in 1990. He was proud of the time spent in Central America with CIMMYT, and the lessons he learned and struggles he witnessed shaped his research program at OSU.

He returned to OSU in December 1991 and joined the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences as an Assistant Professor. He was serving as the Walter R. Stlington Chair of Agriculture and Regents Professor before his untimely passing. His program was one of the most prolific soil fertility and plant nutrition programs around the world and attracted many students both international and domestic.

Dr. Raun has left an astounding legacy in the field of agronomy. He served the Societies in many roles, including as Editor of *Agronomy Journal* from 2012 to 2017 and Senior Editor of

Agrosystems, Geosciences, and Environment from 2018 to 2021. He has authored more than 254 refereed journal articles, three books, 15 book chapters, and holds 13 patents. All his scientific contributions in sensor-based nutrient management, improving nutrient use efficiencies in cereal crops, and delivering a hand planter for developing countries deserve a systematic examination. However, the objective of this article is to highlight Dr. Raun's mentoring legacy.

A legacy through our eyes (voices of gratitude)

"Dr. Raun has been an incredibly strong, enlightening, empowering force in my professional and personal life. He is the reason I keep going even when life is tough, and he is the reason I believe in the goodness of humans." —**Olga Walsh, Associate**

Professor, Virginia Tech

"Dr. Raun truly cared for all his students. He would say: I just need to get that degree in your pocket, so you can get the job that you deserve. One of my favorite things to do was to meet with him early on Friday morning to discuss any field/research updates or to talk about his favorite movies. He had this contagious laugh when he quoted his favorite lines of a movie. He had an open-door policy and would stop what he was doing to help you with everything, even if he wasn't your adviser." —**Tyler Lynch, Senior Agriculturalist,**

Oklahoma State University

"Dr. Raun was committed to teaching those of us from the U.S. that U.S. is just one of nearly 200 countries. His geography quizzes were a gentle nudge toward global awareness. His mentorship extended beyond the realm of science. He taught us what it truly means to be part of a professional community, even if that meant paying extra to stay in the annual hotel block or enduring a well-placed guilt trip to grasp the importance of thoughtful manuscript reviews." —**Wade Thomason, Professor and Department Head,**

Oklahoma State University

"Dr. Raun's work ethic was student centered. I do not recall a single day when he received a manuscript or dissertation, and it took him more than a day to review." —**Lawrence Aula, Research Assistant Professor, University of Nebraska–Lincoln**

Dr. Raun's central focus: his students

The central focus of Dr. Raun's 30-year career at OSU, from its beginning to its untimely end, was students (Figure 1). He chaired 103 degree programs as major professor conferred to more than 81 students from 22 different countries (Figure 2). Overall, he served as a major professor on 69 M.S. and 34 Ph.D. degrees (Figure 3). His lab was diverse: Of the 103 students earning their degrees under his supervision, 45 were international, 58 domestic, 30 female, and 73 male (Figure 3). Twenty-three students received both their M.S. and Ph.D. under Dr. Raun's supervision.

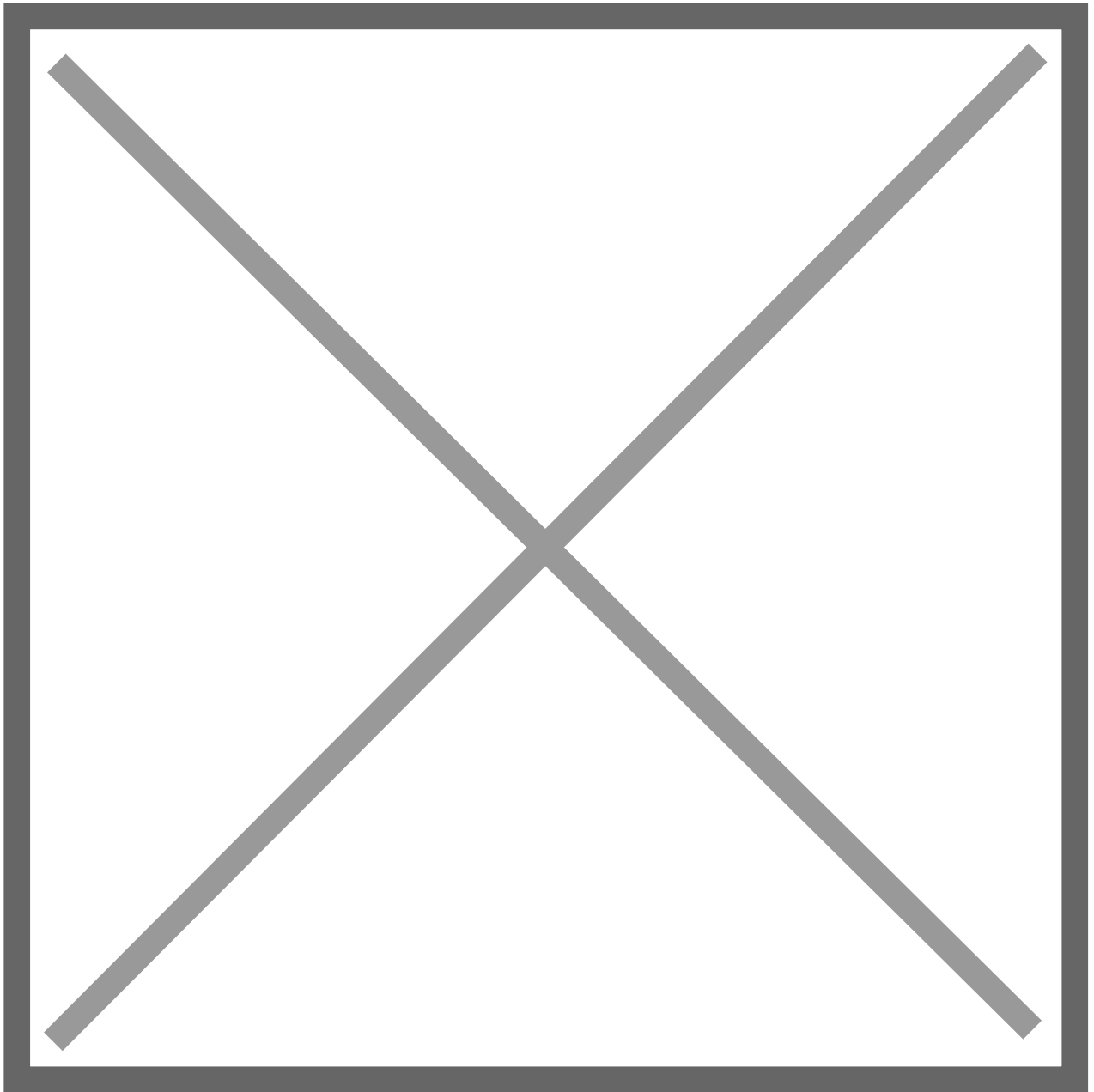


Figure 1. Poster showcasing Dr. Raun's soil nutrient management students, including their names, degrees, and years of completion.

In a paper written on what makes a great mentor, Zhang et al. (2021) identified several qualities such as honesty, integrity, authenticity, communication skills, courage, ability to inspire, energy, positivity and optimism, vision, action orientation, creativity, flexibility,

patience, curiosity, ability to listen well, reflectiveness, kindness, and empathy. You pick any of these qualities, and Dr. Raun had it in abundance.

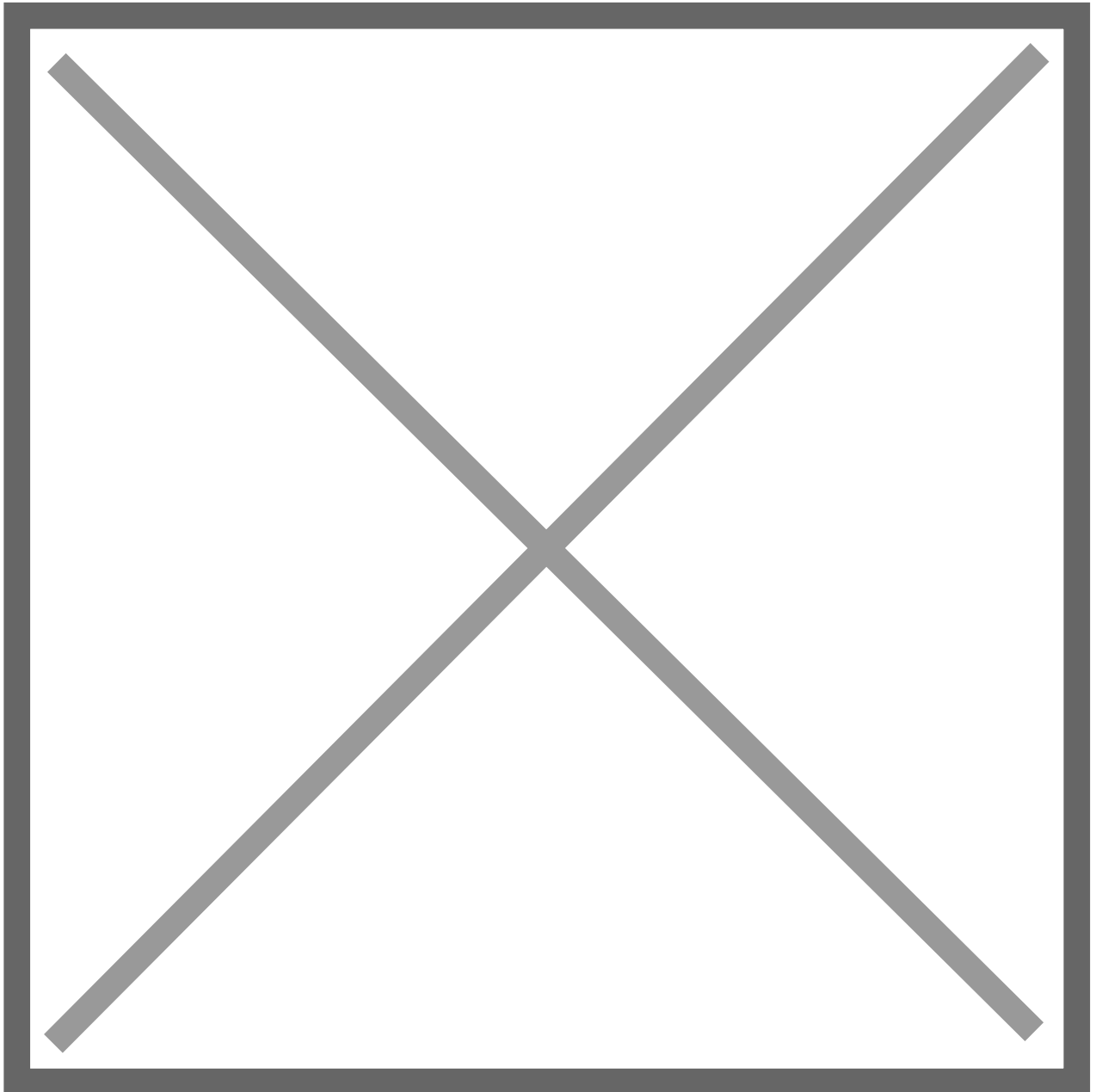


Figure 2. Map showing the distribution of students worldwide who received their degrees under Dr. Bill Raun from 1991 to 2021 at Oklahoma State University. The bar graph shows the number of degree recipients worldwide.

Even though he was a hard task master, he was patient and communicated clearly. He went above and beyond and was very empathetic to the needs of the students. He had a clear vision when it came to research as well as to all his mentee's future; he cared deeply for his students' success. He was honest and authentic, and any time you went to discuss something with him, he would listen with genuine curiosity and would make you feel like the most important person in the room. He was one of the most hard-working individuals and was frequently the first one to arrive and last one to leave. His door was always open, and anyone was welcome at any time to discuss anything from research, movies, and advice on life. The legacy of Dr. Raun's contributions persists today through his students, who are serving society in various ways.

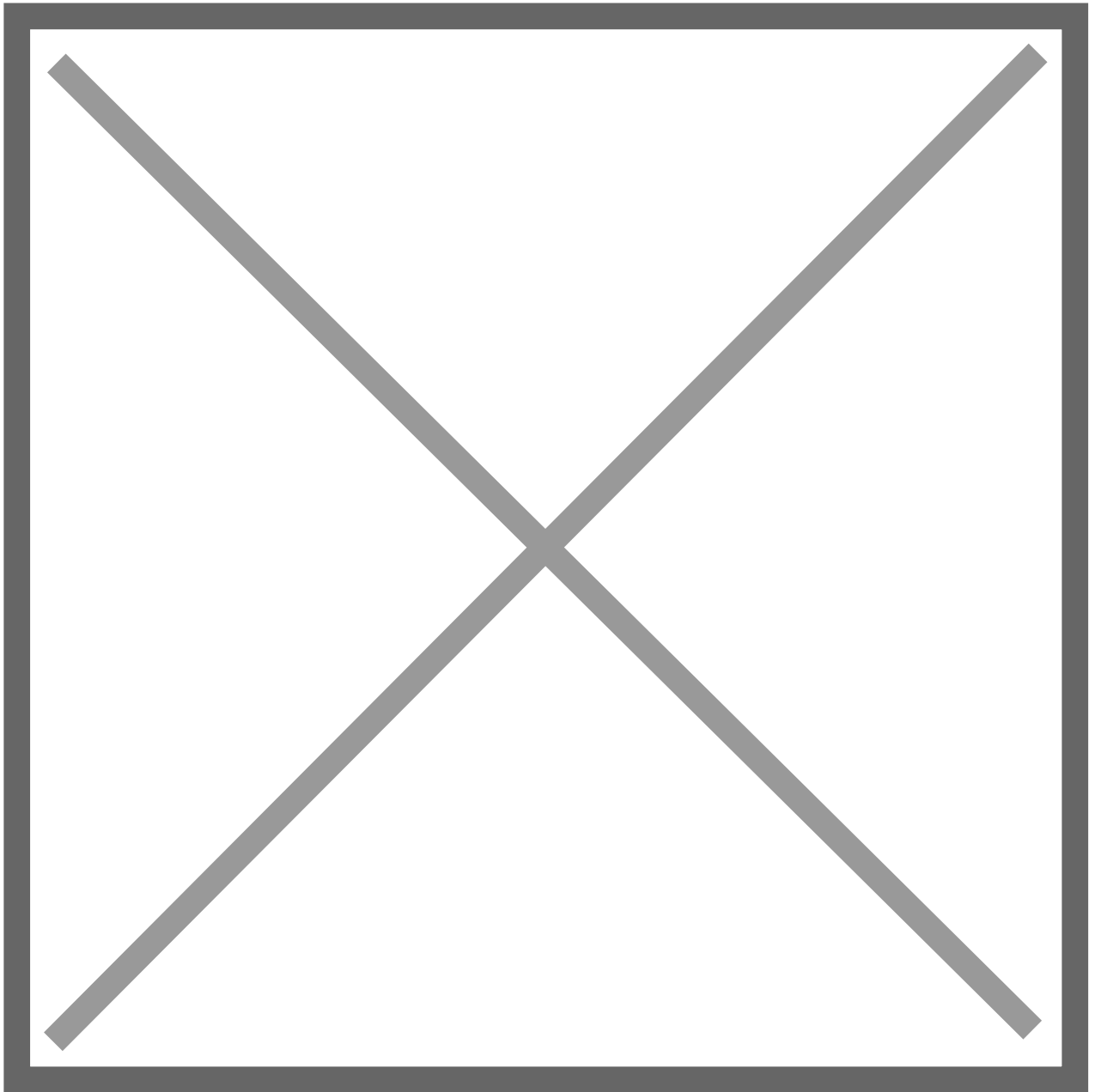


Figure 3. Distribution of graduate students in Dr. Bill Raun's lab, highlighting the degree numbers, type, and the recipient's region and gender.

Dr. Raun is fondly remembered by his students, colleagues, and his family.

A legacy through our eyes (voices of gratitude)

"Dr. Raun was one of the most passionate, hardworking professors I ever had the opportunity to learn from. The way he led with such determination, heart, and true grit through the challenges that came his way made a lasting impact on me. He would always say: I am a little fish in a big pond, which perfectly demonstrates his humble view. I have so much gratitude for Dr. Raun in pushing me to reach higher than I thought possible and opening my eyes to a more global view of agriculture production."

—Elizabeth Lemings, Agronomist, Tessengerlo Kerley

"He was among the most exceptional mentors I have had the privilege to work with. This skills and work principles I have acquired from him have been profoundly significant in my career." **—Peter Omara, Assistant Professor, Texas A&M**

University

"Dr. Raun saw potential in me long before I ever saw it in myself. As someone new to agriculture, I never imagined I could manage lab operations, handle accounting, maintain equipment, or balance purchasing—all while starting graduate school in a completely new field. But he believed in me and gave me the trust and responsibility to grow. His mentorship not only shaped my skills, but also gave me the confidence to build a career in agriculture. Without him, there would be no Bee in this industry." **—Bee**

Chim, Assistant Professor, Oklahoma State University

"Dr. Raun's guidance and support have shaped who I am today. His wisdom, kindness and the memory of his smile will never be forgotten" **—Chandibyani, Veterinary**

Surgeon, Animal Doctors in Singapore

"Dr. Raun believed in me more than I believed in myself. I owe every bit of success in life to him." **—Jagmandeep Dhillon, Associate Professor, Mississippi State**

University

References

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