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Acrid smoke, the roar and crackle of flame, and the sudden intensity of heat have taught Hope Miller a great deal. Namely, that they're elements of a great day at the office.

As she goes through her senior year at the [School of Forest Resources and Conservation](#) at the [University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences](#), Hope is looking to join a fire crew for a gap year before pursuing graduate studies. She's seeking what she calls an "adrenaline-filled environment" for that first job out of college.

I'll put the classroom education Hope is getting at the UF/IFAS [College of Agricultural and Life Sciences](#) up against any in the nation. Our faculty lead the nation in USDA teaching awards, and they pivoted instantly to online instruction when the pandemic closed classrooms.

The classroom, like the laboratory, can only simulate real-world conditions, so [Dean Elaine Turner](#) has consistently supported ways for students to learn outside traditional classrooms. That includes undergraduate research, internships, study abroad, leadership conferences and professional symposia.

I want every CALS undergraduate to have the opportunity Hope has had to experience real-world conditions. That's why I've pledged to provide that opportunity.

I call it the [Vice President's Promise](#). Dean [Elaine Turner](#) and I are working to expand and enrich beyond-the-classroom opportunities for CALS undergraduate students.

For example, think of all a student could absorb in two days at the Florida Forestry Association's annual meeting. Networking with industry professionals and a broader picture of the landscape of the industry can provide them insights and mentorship.

Opportunity can be expensive. We want these to be opportunities that *all* students can afford. Dean Turner and I [launched](#) the fund-raising portion of the initiative in October. The money we raise will defray the cost of outside-the-classroom learning—providing a stipend so a student can afford an unpaid internship, or covering travel costs for study abroad, for example.

This is so important to me and my wife Kay that we have pledged \$10,000 to start the initiative. I hope you'll consider joining us as donors. Visit <https://give.ifas.ufl.edu/VPPromise/> , email advancement@ifas.ufl.edu or call 352-392-1975.

Hope has gone beyond the classroom since she was a freshman. She volunteered in [Rae Crandall's lab](#), eventually earning the instructor's trust to do her own research project examining the interaction between native grasses and long leaf pine. It resulted in a published manuscript.

The summer after her sophomore year she interned with Alachua County Forester David Conser. Hope said learning at

the side of a man with more than three decades of experience making “house calls” to local producers deepened her appreciation for public service. She learned, just as the producers did, about what to plant, what crews to hire at harvest time, and why certain trees weren’t growing to their potential.

In the fall, she interned with [Southern Fire Exchange](#). She developed and implemented plans for engaging young people in the importance of forestry. She wrote articles on prescribed burn crews that are student-led, designed a social media campaign to distribute communications to a wider audience and increase interest from audiences who are not part of the industry.

Hope has long thought of the woods as a classroom. She found like-minded faculty at SFRC. And she’ll emerge with a relationship with fire that probably couldn’t be forged in a classroom, one of respect, not fear.

[Scott Angle](#) is the University of Florida’s Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources and leader of the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS).