Good Food Institute

Seeding change

2021 Mid-Year Impact Report





Dear Friend,

Every seed, no matter how small, contains unending potential. When a seed germinates, it opens to the sun and shares the gift of new growth. By degrees, ecosystems flourish, and landscapes are rehabilitated.

The same is true of your financial support for GFI. When you make a contribution, you plant the seeds of a more sustainable, secure, and just food system for all. Your support creates GFI's place in the world at a time when radical change is required to ensure a life-sustaining planet.

In this report, you will read about your impact. You'll hear from a student reshaping her university's curricula, a scientist sparking national interest in cultivated meat, and legislators advancing research for plant-based proteins. These powerful stories are just three examples of how your generosity enables GFI to effect transformational change.

You power our work, and we are thankful for your partnership.

With gratitude and optimism,



Susan Halteman
vice president, development



Bruce Friedrich
founder and president

Sophia Retchin is shaping the academic landscape

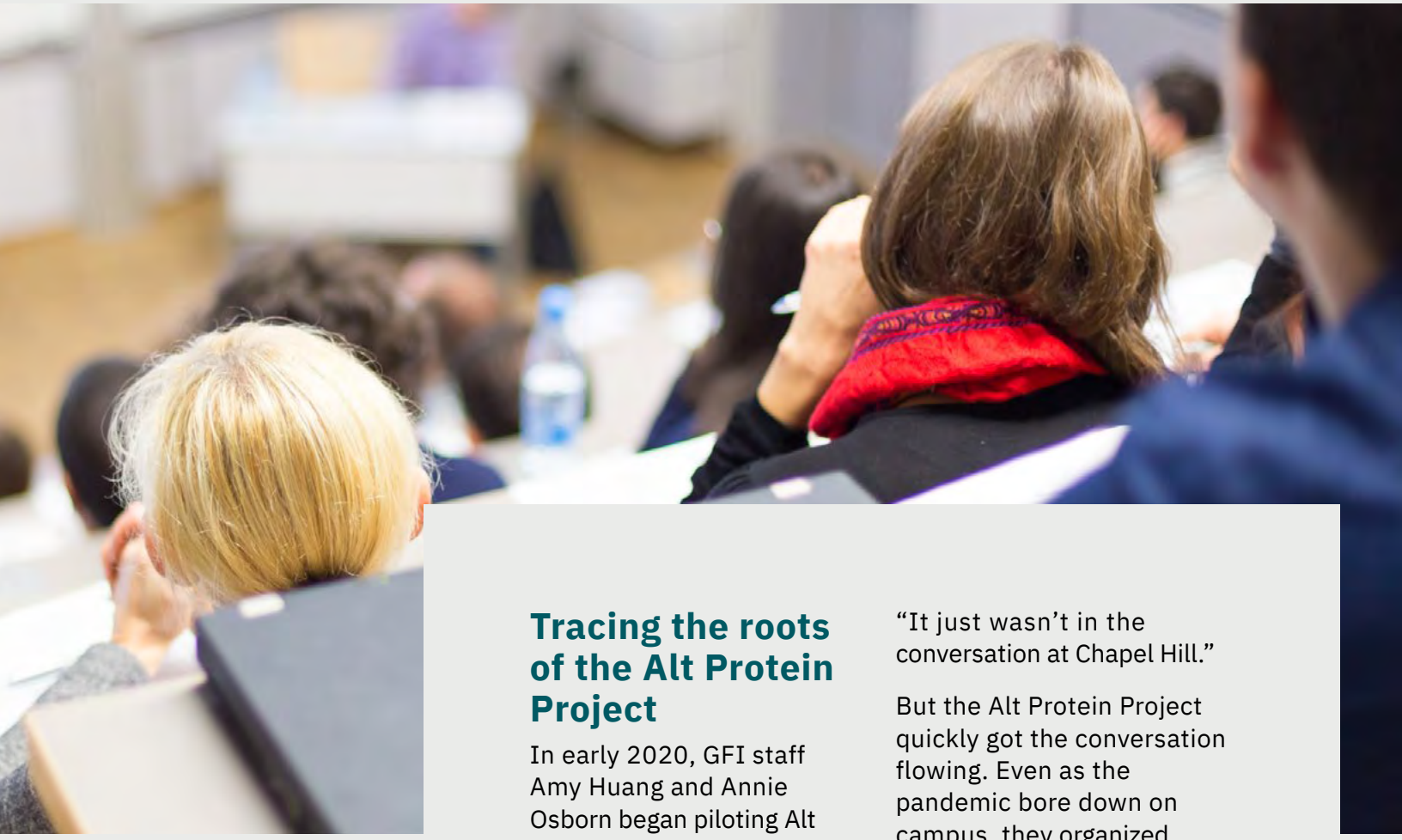




Students at University of North Carolina will soon have the chance to take new courses in cellular agriculture and the science of plant-based proteins, thanks to rising senior Sophia Retchin and her peers in the UNC Chapel Hill Alt Protein Project.

Retchin was born and raised in North Carolina, and her hometown and university campus share a river basin with the top two hog-farming counties in the United States. She arrived at Chapel Hill focused on regulating concentrated animal feeding operations: “I came across GFI and had this whole shift in perspective when I discovered we can change the food system through alternative proteins instead.”

When she learned about the Alt Protein Project, a new GFI university innovation program, Retchin inquired about starting a chapter at UNC Chapel Hill.



Tracing the roots of the Alt Protein Project

In early 2020, GFI staff Amy Huang and Annie Osborn began piloting Alt Protein Project student groups to establish alt protein courses, expand open-access research, stimulate entrepreneurship, raise awareness, and build community. The program has grown rapidly to include 16 chapters across six countries.

With GFI's support, Retchin co-founded Chapel Hill's chapter with Deeksha Mittal in April 2020, recruiting six others. Their small but influential team has put alt proteins on the map in the Research Triangle.

When they began their work, "No entity on campus was talking about alternative proteins," said Retchin. "It just wasn't in the conversation at Chapel Hill."

But the Alt Protein Project quickly got the conversation flowing. Even as the pandemic bore down on campus, they organized remote regional meetups and webinars, collaborating with scientists, entrepreneurs, and other innovators to build an alt protein ecosystem in North Carolina. Next, Retchin and her peers set out to add alt proteins to the Research Triangle's curricula.

Bringing professors into the field

They recruited professors at NC State, known for its strong biomedical engineering and crop science programs, to put together a one-day course on alt proteins, which is likely to be a repeat offering for years to come.

In collaboration with Chapel Hill staff, Retchin's team is now designing a first-year seminar covering plant-based protein chemistry and a biology course on cultivated meat. Both are slated for 2022. Retchin is hopeful that the group will continue with this momentum: "If we have about five courses taught on the topic, we would have a minor. So, two down, three to go."

Students have the power to reshape academia—and thus the future of food—in ways that no one else can. And support from academia is critical to this growing field. Retchin puts it succinctly: "We need more open-access university research, and we need students educated in the business and science of alt proteins."

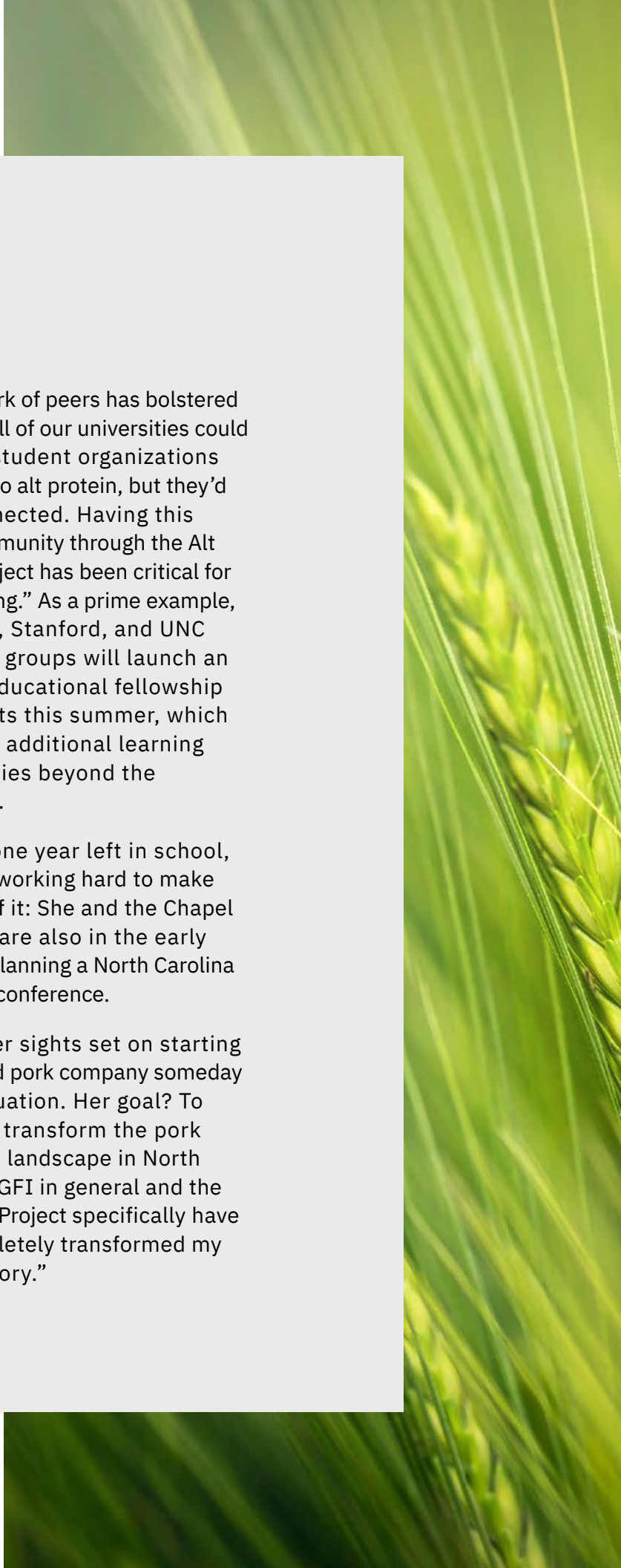
Making international impact

The progress at UNC is part of a large wave of successes. Alt Protein Project groups at Wageningen University, Stanford, and UC Davis are also working with their universities to develop courses or incorporate alt proteins into existing courses.

This network of peers has bolstered Retchin: "All of our universities could have had student organizations dedicated to alt protein, but they'd be disconnected. Having this global community through the Alt Protein Project has been critical for collaborating." As a prime example, the Brown, Stanford, and UNC Chapel Hill groups will launch an informal educational fellowship for students this summer, which will create additional learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

With just one year left in school, Retchin is working hard to make the most of it: She and the Chapel Hill group are also in the early stages of planning a North Carolina alt protein conference.

She has her sights set on starting a cultivated pork company someday after graduation. Her goal? To completely transform the pork production landscape in North Carolina: "GFI in general and the Alt Protein Project specifically have both completely transformed my life trajectory."



Serbia's homegrown cultivated meat movement



Photo courtesy of Upside Foods

Dr. Ivana Gadjanski felt most at home behind a microscope, but after a dozen interviews for radio, TV, and newspapers, she is becoming an expert with a microphone as well.

A research associate professor and assistant director for science at the BioSense Institute in Serbia and a Fulbright visiting scholar from Columbia University, Gadjanski is one of 14 scientists worldwide who received research funding for alt proteins through GFI's inaugural grant program. And the media across the Balkans wanted to know about it. She is a pioneer in the region.

"The GFI research grant was, as far as I know, the only research funding opportunity available in 2018 for cultivated meat," Gadjanski told us. "Without it, I really doubt we would be able to kick-start this line of research within the BioSense Institute."

Founding the competitive grant program

GFI opened the request for proposals in 2018 to address this funding gap. GFI associate director of science and technology Dr. Erin Rees Clayton explained: "We launched the grant program because so many fundamental research questions hadn't been answered. There was and still is a real need for open-access academic research that would advance the entire industry."

Thanks to the generosity and vision of a few donors, GFI has been able to allocate more than $7 million to high-impact projects around the world.



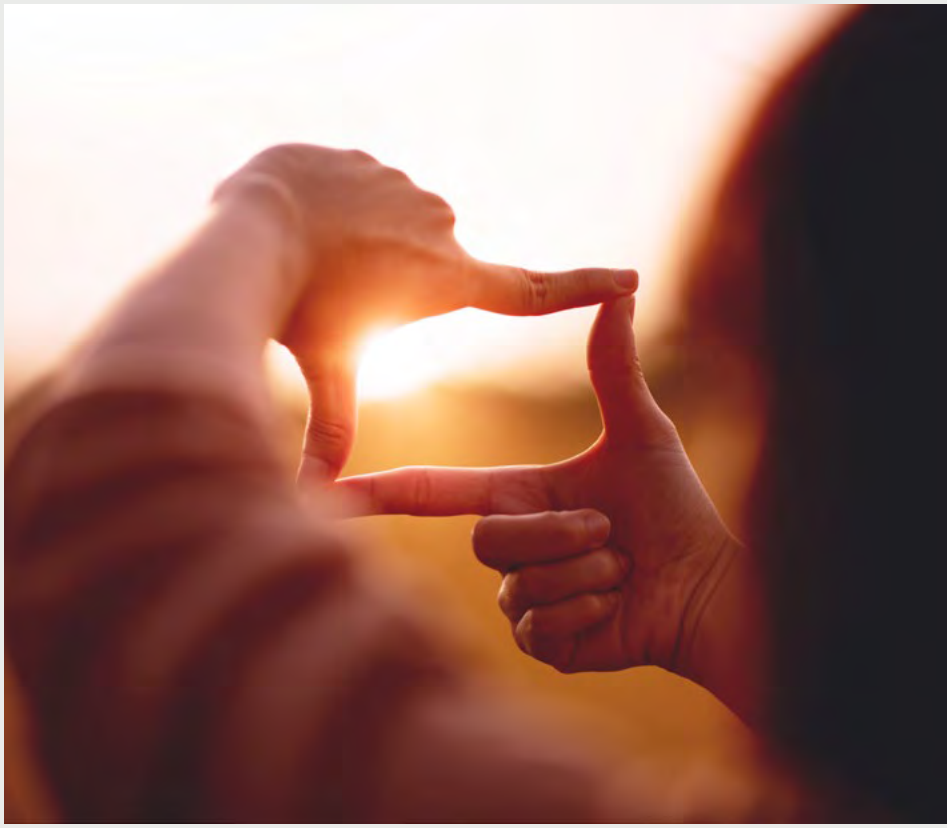
Cultivating a research & training environment

When Gadjanski and her team won funding for cultivated meat research, it sparked national interest, which has matured into a growing academic network encompassing students, faculty, and administrators.

Gadjanski recounted: “I was getting invited to many talk shows on national TV, which felt a bit strange. As a scientist, I’m not used to that much media attention. But it also felt good to talk to a wide audience about cultivated meat.”

Students, in particular, took note. “I am especially happy that many students started reaching out to my team,” Gadjanski continued. “They can now join the Biosense Alt Protein Project that our three PhD students founded with support from GFI.”

What began in the BioSense Institute has grown into research collaborations across a range of partners at the University of Novi Sad and the Fraunhofer Institute. “Other researchers from different scientific disciplines are getting more and more interested in cultivated meat,” Gadjanski noted. “Companies are also getting in touch with us, interested in learning how the research is progressing, which is quite exciting.”



Thinking big picture

Serbia’s blossoming research community is a microcosm of the grant program’s larger goals: To bring scientists into the field, support career pathways for the next generation of researchers, and mobilize new funding for alt protein research from public institutions.

Rees Clayton reflected: “The grant program is seed funding. Our grantees get preliminary results or a prototype and then go on to successfully compete for additional funding from other research funding agencies. Meanwhile, they’re providing training opportunities to the postdocs and students who work on their projects. Our grant program donors are dropping a stone in a pond and creating this incredible ripple effect all around the world.”

Through the research grant program, GFI has funded projects in 13 countries and facilitated cross-border collaboration so scientists can build on one another’s work.

This is important to Gadjanski: “The new knowledge we generate is not locked up as proprietary information. This helps open up alternative protein research not only to startups and companies but to more scientists who work in public institutions.”

Rees Clayton put it in the simplest possible terms: “Everyone benefits.”



Minnesota legislators advance plant-based protein research funding

In April of this year, Minnesota introduced the world's first bipartisan legislation to fund plant-based protein research. Sponsored by Rep. Dan Wolgamott (D) and Sen. Carrie Ruud (R), the legislation is designed to encourage the development of Minnesota's plant-based food industry.

Laying the groundwork

In early 2021, GFI senior policy specialist Scott Weathers identified Minnesota—with world-class agricultural research institutions and strong government support for farmers—as a good candidate to help lead plant-based protein innovation in the United States.

Market research shows that plant-based food sales are growing at twice the rate of overall food sales. "Investing in R&D for plant-based foods would benefit Minnesota's agricultural sector by creating jobs and helping farmers discover new uses for crops in the plant-based economy," Weathers said. He believed Minnesota legislators would be interested in these opportunities to better support farming and food production communities across the state.

Sowing interest with policymakers

Working with Hylden Advocacy & Law, Weathers engaged Rep. Dan Wolgamott and Sen. Carrie Ruud about legislation to fund plant-based research at Minnesota's agricultural research institutions. They took up the cause with enthusiasm.

Senator Ruud sees it as a double-win: "If we can ensure our farming community is at the leading edge of a promising new industry—with all the economic opportunity that entails—and at the same time help supply folks with nutritious, plant-protein-rich food, well then, we've made two investments for the price of one."

Representative Wolgamott shares Ruud's optimism: "It's not just about the food that comes out of the ground—it's about the ground too. That soil is the life force of our agricultural community. We're headed for some trying times with the changing climate. Funding crop research for new plant-based foods will ultimately give farmers more choices, more resiliency, and help decrease the climate impact of meat production."

Encouraging progress at every level

After several months of laying the groundwork with GFI and Hylden Advocacy & Law, the legislators introduced HF 2583 and SF 2483 to help farmers discover uses for crops as ingredients in plant-based foods and to optimize such ingredients, thus solidifying Minnesota's leadership role in the new climate economy.

Minnesota is just one example of collaboration; GFI staff are working hard to ensure policymakers at all levels of government understand that alt proteins are a climate solution and that related research is worthy of public investment. In just the first six months, 2021 has seen several notable wins at the state, federal, and international levels.

State

GFI co-sponsored the introduction of a California bill to create The Smart Climate Agriculture Program, requiring the Department of Food and Agriculture to fund the transition of small and midsize farmers from raising livestock and feed crops to growing ingredients for plant-based foods.

Federal

GFI authored letters on behalf of a broad-based coalition comprising companies including Unilever and Kraft Heinz, trade groups including the American Mushroom Institute and U.S. Pea & Lentil Council, and NGOs including Consumer Reports and Greenpeace. The letters to the House and Senate appropriations committees request that $50 million be allocated to both the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for alt protein research.

To our excitement, Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), chair of the House Appropriations Committee, advocated alt protein research in her remarks at an Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee USDA budget hearing, and a team of House members signed a letter to House appropriations subcommittees, also asking for $50 million each to NSF and USDA for alt protein research.

Additionally, Breakthrough Energy, a new Bill Gates-founded NGO that spun out of Gates's Breakthrough Energy Ventures, incorporated GFI's policy recommendations in their new federal climate policy playbook. And Ezra Klein wrote about GFI's efforts in the New York Times: "The Good Food Institute produced a wish list calling for $2 billion in funding… I'd like to see Congress dream a bit bigger, but the point is that it wouldn't take much to supercharge this industry."

International

This fall, GFI will co-lead a UN Food Systems Summit working group focused on alt proteins in collaboration with the World Economic Forum. GFI's affiliates in India, Israel, Brazil, APAC, and Europe are joining GFI U.S. in pushing to make plant-based and cultivated meat a prominent climate solution focus at the summit, with plans to ride that wave into Scotland for the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in November.





The Good Food Institute (GFI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working internationally to make plant-based and cultivated meat delicious, affordable, and accessible. GFI advances open-access research, mobilizes resources and talent, and empowers partners across the food system to create a sustainable, secure, and just protein supply.

Our family of donors powers our progress toward a world where alternative proteins are no longer alternative.

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