There is a critical and persistent need to increase faculty diversity in higher education in general, and in STEM in particular. Also, in most STEM fields, a strong postdoctoral fellowship is required before seeking faculty positions. Literature in the Chronicle of Higher Education and other publications reveal how scientists from under-represented groups have difficulty securing postdoctoral fellowship at top research-intensive universities, particularly those who received their doctoral degree from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Hispanic Serving Institutions, and other minority-serving institutions. Therefore, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences implemented the Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellows Initiative to achieve two aims: 1) increase diversity among the postdoctoral population in the College; and 2) mentor and prepare scientists from underrepresented groups to be competitive for faculty positions in the academy. The Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellows Initiative is very strategic, purposeful, and intentional in seeking to achieve those aims.

Through a college-wide Request for Proposals (RFP) process, faculties submit proposals to host a Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellow. The proposal outlines how the faculty member will mentor, support, and coach the post-doc in critical ways including, but not limited to, engaging the postdoc in interdisciplinary research, manuscript development, grant proposal development, teaching excellence, and other areas. The proposals also include a letter of support from the Department Head committing to a specified amount of professional development funds for the postdoc as well as other support. Faculty with proposals that demonstrate a true commitment to preparing the postdoc for the professoriate are selected to share their research opportunity nationwide in search of an excellent trainee for their labs. A fellowship awardee is selected from among the top trainees submitted by faculty. The program is showing early signs of success. To date, there have been two Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellows. The first was Dr. Terrence Gardner who completed his doctoral degree at Alabama A&M University ( an HBCU). Dr. Gardner finished his postdoc in the Department of Soil Science in 2014 under the mentorship of Dr. Owen Duckworth. Due to the leadership of Dean Richard Linton, Dr. Gardner was hired as an Assistant Professor in that same department. The current Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellow is Dr. Warren Sconiers who is in the Department of Entomology under the mentorship of Dr. Steven Frank. Dr. Wes Watson, Department Head in the Department of Entomology, is also very engaged with the postdoc. The College has already sent out a RFP for a third Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellow who will begin in the Fall 2016. In short, this initiative is a promising practice that produces highly competitive STEM scientists to increase faculty diversity at our nation’s top Colleges of Agriculture.

For information on the Dean’s Postdoctoral Fellowship recipients visit http://harvest.cals.ncsu.edu/diversity/index.cfm?pageID=6681. For an article written about the initiative, visit http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/agcomm/news-center/perspectives/postdoctoral-program-aims-for-greater-faculty-diversity/