Is the glass half-full or half-empty in the West? Stanford students tend to look at the American West and see it half-full — and want to do something about it. And they believe they can.

I should expect it by now. But it still surprises me when a student walks into my office, sits down, and begins to tell me about a wildly ambitious and intellectually adventurous idea. Like walking from San Francisco to Yosemite in the footsteps of John Muir to explore the history of conservation across a transect of California’s landscape. Or kayaking from Hopkins Marine Station in Monterey to the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla to explore the changing nature and human uses of California’s coast. Or hauling potted aspen trees into the San Juan National Forest in southwestern Colorado to conduct a field experiment to determine what is causing the massive sudden death of vast stands of iconic, beautiful, quaking aspen groves in the Rocky Mountains.

I’m not making any of this up. And that’s just scratching the surface. This summer the Bill Lane Center for the American West will send a dozen interns to national parks, as well as conservation and media organizations around the West. We’ll also have half a dozen research assistants working here at the Center. These students are inspirational. They go out into the West full of vim and vigor and they bring their energy and curiosity and learning back to the Center.

This issue of our newsletter is dedicated to them. Inside you will find four short pieces from current and former

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Finding an Honor’s Thesis in the Rural West
By Nicholas Viles

The most important aspect of the Bill Lane Center for the American West, from my point of view as a graduate student, is this intellectual agora while coordinating a series of lunchtime discussions around the study of the North American Old West. Discussions bring together graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, visiting scholars, and Stanford faculty to explore major intellectual questions and new approaches to the study of the region. Our sessions have ranged widely over the “comparative Wests” of Canada, Australia, and the western United States; the Pacific World; digital histories; religious encounters in the nineteenth-century American West; and integrating the sciences and humanities in these histories.

While jumping from religious ideas in the old West to the best way to electronically present historical data on the web in the new West may seem like an odd juxtaposition, there is a certain logic to the vibrancy of the Center as a whole. It is fitting that the Center’s wide range of scholarship mirrors the diversity of the American West itself.

As a graduate student, I have been honored to play a small role in constructing this intellectual agora while coordinating a series of lunchtime discussions around the study of the North American Old West. The discussions bring together graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, visiting scholars, and Stanford faculty to explore major intellectual questions and new approaches to the study of the region. Our sessions have ranged widely over the “comparative Wests” of Canada, Australia, and the western United States; the Pacific World; digital histories; religious encounters in the nineteenth-century American West; and integrating the sciences and humanities in these histories.

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The most important aspect of the Bill Lane Center for the American West, from my point of view as a graduate student, is this intellectual agora. It provides a forum for the exchange of diverse ideas by fostering collaboration and engagement among scholars and students and the larger community of the West. It gives scholars the opportunity to hear from the many of us who gladly dedicate our futures to studying the American West, and an antidote to the long, lonely, but productive hours we dedicate to the history of the West.
(Continued from page 1)

students who have been closely involved with the Center this year. So closely involved, as you will see, that much of what we do would not be possible without them.

Whether we’re working on constitutional reform in California, the challenges facing the rural West, or moving toward more sustainable water systems in California and the West, everything that we do engages students and so much of what we do depends on them. The future of the West is in their hands.

To find out how you can support and be involved in the teaching, research, and public engagement that we do here at the Bill Lane Center for the American West, please contact me: jonchristensen@stanford.edu.

Join us in exploring the past, present, and future of the American West. Visit http://west.stanford.edu. Find out how you can support and be involved in the Center. Sign up for e-mail alerts about upcoming events. And keep in touch with us about what’s going on in your corner of the American West.

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