

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Educating Future Agriculturalists

I have spent my career helping prepare students for their futures in various aspects of beef production. I have been privileged to see them become highly successful in their chosen fields.

The next generation of agriculturalists will come from diverse backgrounds with different educational experiences. Many students preparing for careers in beef production have the advantage of growing up on farms and ranches.

Their hands-on experience of caring for livestock starts at a very young age. These students often benefit from being actively involved in 4-H, FFA, and other youth associations such as the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA).

Differing origins

However, because less than 2% of the U.S. population is directly involved in agriculture, many in the next generation will come from rural, but non-agricultural backgrounds, or urban/suburban settings. While some of these students will have been exposed to agriculture, many will enter high school and secondary education with completely “fresh eyes” for the challenges and opportunities facing agriculture.

The skill sets and training needed to be prepared for agricultural careers in the 21st century are diverse while providing opportunities for students

with a wide variety of interests and strengths. Both formal classroom education and work experience that build knowledge will prepare the next generation of agriculturalists.

Skills and training in communication and management will also be increasingly important as the connection between consumers and producers of beef strengthens and expectations for transparency and accountability increase.

It starts before graduation

Classroom education as well as structured experiences such as part-time jobs and job-shadowing provide important exposure to the knowledge and skills needed in 21st century beef production.

In addition, many careers will require or benefit from post-high school training at technical colleges, junior colleges and universities. As agriculture (and the rest of the economy) increases the use of technology and its uses, the ability to learn new skills and work with experts will be paramount.

Students interested in veterinary medicine or advanced graduate training will be needed for

agricultural careers in various areas. There will be an increasing need for people trained to help the beef industry deal with the complex interactions among agronomy/range management, beef cattle production and husbandry, meat science, economics, and consumer demands.

While it certainly appears the beef industry faces challenges meeting future workforce needs, there are talented and enthusiastic students from grade school to graduate school who are already preparing to meet those needs.

The future is bright both for the students who have not yet started their careers — and for the beef industry they plan to serve. Throughout my career as an educator, the skill sets that students needed to acquire has changed and evolved; but the one constant has been the high quality of young people looking forward to a lifelong career in the beef industry. **A**

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.