

Choosing a Career in Agriculture

by Lisa Hawkins Moser

Choosing the right career is one of the most important decisions a person makes during their lifetime. In this era of specialization, it seems there are an increasing number of career opportunities available. This is true of many industries including agriculture.

"No matter what your interest, there is a way to apply it to the agriculture industry," says Jackie McClaskey, assistant director of academic programs for the College of Agriculture at Kansas State University (K-State), Manhattan. She said

there is an increasing number of students, especially women, who are choosing agriculture majors.

"Over K-State's last seven years, we have seen a 37 percent increase in the number of students enrolled in any of our four-year degree programs at the College of Agriculture says McClaskey. She says K-State's numbers are reflective of the national enrollment trends.

Based on a Food and Agricultural Education Information System (FAEIS) report, which tracks enrollment

trends of land grant universities, the percentages and employment areas were as follows: 15 percent science, engineers and related specialists; 14 percent managers and financial specialists; 15 percent marketing, merchandising and sales; 6 percent communications and education; 4 percent social services; 24 percent agriculture and forestry production; 21 percent graduate study; and 1 percent foreign. This data was based on the 1994-95 school year.

Looking at the fall of 1997, McClaskey expects an 11 to 12 percent increase in new student enrollment within the College of Agriculture. The increasing number of agriculture graduates still does not fill the demand. "There is a 5-percent annual shortage of the number of students graduating in agriculture with a four-year degree in comparison to the number of jobs available," she says.

She believes one of the reasons for this increasing demand ties to the changing dynamics of the world's population. "From the time a 1997 high school student graduates until he retires, the world population is expected to double," says McClaskey.

She believes this population growth will place an increased pressure on those involved in agriculture to feed, clothe and shelter twice as many people as it does now.

These changing trends are also noted by Bob Broeckelman, director of employment and training for the Farm Credit Bank of Wichita. "The job descriptions haven't even been written for some of the jobs students will do upon college graduation. That is how fast our world is changing," Broeckelman says.

Employees are trained to think differently today than in the decade previously. "The world of work has changed in the last 10 years from being told what to do to figuring out what needs to be done. There is a lot more problem solving involved," he adds.

On a personal level, Broeckelman chose to major in agriculture at a young age. He originally had planned to pursue a career in production agriculture, but his allergies kept him from following that path. Upon advice from his vocational agriculture teacher and his father, Broeckelman chose to use his talents working for agriculture in another way.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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"When I realized I could not work outside, my dad told me I could still have a big impact on agriculture by doing other things. It was good advice for a freshman in high school from a dad with an eighth grade education," Broeckelman says.

With a degree in agricultural education, he taught school for five years and then coordinated the state FFA program in Kansas for five years.

Seventeen years ago Broeckelman began working for Farm Credit Bank of Wichita. He is in charge of employment and training for 850 people in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado and New Mexico. Unlike other lending institutions, Farm Credit Bank only finances agricultural clients. Therefore, Broeckehnan says about 80 percent of Farm Credit Bank's employees have agriculture backgrounds.

"Money is loaned through relationships. Farmers and ranchers are very proud of their operations and the quickest way to insult them is to send someone who doesn't understand agriculture out to their place to make a loan," he says.

Like Broeckehnan, Lori Stickley, director of marketing services for the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program, also believes her production agriculture background is of value in her career.

"From the grassroots level to working with the chefs and restaurateurs, I've seen all aspects of the beef business," says Stickley. "My production background and animal science training enables me to explain the technical aspects of beef production to the chefs and restaurateurs."

Stickley grew up on a small Angus ranch in Snohomish, Wash. She was very involved in the Washington Junior Angus Association and the Northwest Junior Angus Association. When she was 18, her family and their Angus cattle relocated to LaSalle,

Colo. In 1991, she was elected to serve on the National Junior Angus Association Board of Directors. She attended Colorado State University and studied animal science.

is to work for a company with an agriculture base," he says.

An appreciation and understanding of agriculture are just two of the many aspects Broeckelman looks for as he

his company has a low turn over rate of 3 to 4 percent per year compared to the national average of 28 percent. "We take selection very seriously at Farm Credit that helps us keep our turnover rate low, which saves us money," he says. "We know the profile of our best loan officers and we aren't concerned with what their major is as long as they think like a loan officer." He hires employees from all agriculture disciplines.

In addition to people and analytical skills, Broeckehnan is looking for potential employees who are focused, possess a high self concept, have the courage to stand up for what they believe is right, are disciplined, organized and are critical thinkers.

Stickley looks for employees who have a desire to learn, are enthusiastic, possess a good work ethic and have a sense of responsibility. Like Broeckelman, she believes organizational skills are very important. She also stresses the value of strong written and oral communication skills.

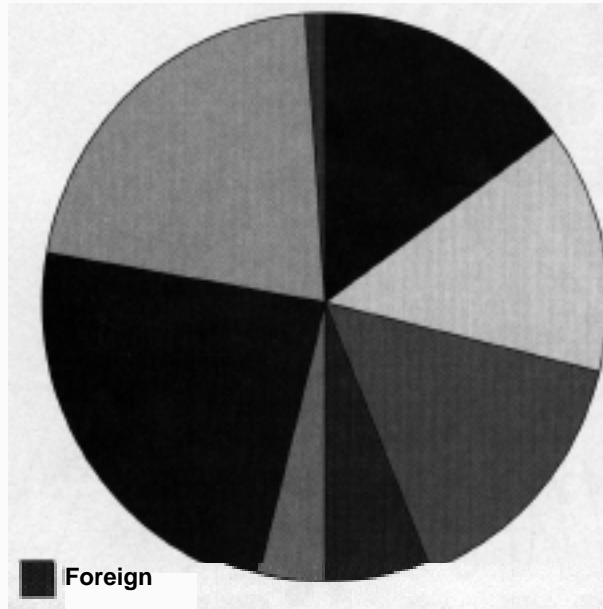
The qualities identified by Broeckelman and Stickley are echoed by many employers. McClaskey works with in graduate placement. "Our employers are looking for graduates with a basic knowledge of agriculture and understand how to apply that to the work environment," says McClaskey

While some of these skills are developed in the classroom, many are learned through involvement in extracurricular activities. All three sources stressed the value of extracurricular involvement. "Students need those outside of the classroom activities to strengthen their communication and people skills."

Another way students are broadening their education is through internships.

"Historically, internships were completed between a student's

LAND GRANT UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT TRENDS



Foreign

Graduate study

Agriculture and forestry production specialists

Social service professionals

Communication and education specialists

Marketing, merchandising and sales

Managers and financial specialists

Scientists, engineers and related specialists

Source: Food and Agricultural Education Information System (FAEIS) 1994-95

"I've always believed in agriculture and found my path in animal science; says Stickley. She has been working for the CAB Program for more than three years.

Stickley's passion for agriculture is an important part of finding the right career according to Broeckelman. "If you love agriculture, one of the first decisions you should make

analyzes potential employees.

"We are looking for a people-oriented employee with strong analytical skills. That is a hard combination to find," he adds. "About 5 percent of the people we interview are that way. On average we will interview 500 people a year to till 25 positions."

Broeckelman believes by following this selection process

junior and senior year of college. However, there is an increasing number of students starting internships during their freshman and sophomore years," says McClaskey. "It's not unusual for students to graduate with two or three internship experiences."

Broeckelman adds, "Our most productive employees were very active in their respective college organizations."

One of the benefits of related work experiences, according to McClaskey, is the opportunity for students to learn about their career choice. From an employer standpoint McClaskey says, "Many employers believe hiring a student with internship experience related to their area is a wise investment."

Along with participating in internships, Broeckelman believes it's important for



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students to evaluate their potential employers. The first step in this process is to register with the university placement services center. Broeckelman recommends students do that in the second semester of their sophomore year. These centers serve as a resource for information about potential employers.

"Students should look at corporate video tapes, visit their potential employers and talk with recent graduates. If you really want to learn what a company is like, that information is available," says

Broeckelman. By researching the company, students are better able to target their right work environment.

In respect to salary expectations, agriculture graduates are competitive with those in other fields, according to McClaskey. She said the average reported starting salary for K-State agriculture graduates in 1996 was \$26,500. And for those dollars, Broeckelman says companies expect graduates to add to the company's profit margin.

"As graduates look into the future, they will have to be

adding value to the company if they expect to maintain their job," Broeckehnan says.

In summary, McClaskey gives these final words of advice to all students considering a future in agriculture. "You can be guaranteed that if you enter a four-year institution; major in agriculture; dedicate time to your studies; develop leadership, communication and people skills through involvement in extracurricular activities; and get some related work experience, you will have a job upon graduation."