

HOT JOBS in Ag

Food industry and biotechnology will drive future careers in agriculture.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Not only are there jobs in agriculture — there are good jobs in agriculture, according to Mike Gaul, director of Ag Career Services at Iowa State University (ISU) in Ames.

“Contrary to popular belief, there are some fantastic opportunities in the ag industry, and it’s just going to get better and better,” Gaul says. His office assists in job placement with ISU’s 2,600 undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Agriculture. Their services are also available to graduate students and alumni in the job market.

Food-related careers

“Right now the hottest area going is anything to do with food — food production, food safety, food quality assurance, food sales, organic production and the list goes on,” Gaul says.

“Food scientists are already in demand, and we expect many more job opportunities in that field in the future,” adds Sara Nagel Newberg, director of career services for the College of Agriculture, Food and

Environmental Sciences at the University of Minnesota (U of M) in Saint Paul. They have 1,075 students enrolled in ag-related majors.

While growth in the food industry is

anticipated in food science and research, Gaul says there are traditional majors that can lead to careers in the food industry as well. “There are many majors that can be tied to food. Within animal science there’s emphasis on meats, and our ag business curriculum is toying with adding a food option,” he says.

Gaul adds, “Our college is certainly aware of this trend toward careers in food-related industries, and curricula have changed to keep our students abreast of that.”

Look to biotechnology

Newberg also anticipates many new opportunities in research. “The future is difficult to predict, but I’m sure future careers in agriculture will have to do with biotechnology,” she says.

For instance, she sees growth in research careers that develop genetically modified strains of grains and livestock for food products, as well as careers that research foods and how they affect health.

Gaul agrees that there will be ample research opportunities in the biotechnology field, but points out that most of these careers will require graduate degrees. Still, Newberg says the trend toward biotech has implications for undergrads as well.

“The biotechnology and research trend will open up jobs in all aspects that support it. And as a result, broad industry will require that undergraduates have an understanding of biotechnology — even if their career is in sales or marketing,” Newberg says.

Because of this, she reports that many majors at the U of M are incorporating biotechnology into curricula so students are knowledgeable about it in their career field.

Natural resources popular

Natural resources and environmental science fields are seeing growth. “There’s been an increase in student

interest in these areas,” Newberg says.

“Some jobs will require master’s and PhDs, but I think many companies are looking for graduates trained in



environmental sciences, whereas it used to be specifically engineering or biology,” Newberg says.

She adds, “This is an area that has career opportunities at the undergraduate level as well, simply because more companies are doing remediation and production ag is seeking specialists to monitor environmental issues.”

In the next five to 10 years, Gaul sees many career opportunities opening up with government agencies — specifically within land management agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Forest Service (FS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The primary reason for this is that a large percentage of the USDA workforce is pending retirement within the next few years, according to Gaul. Secondly, the recent Farm Bill has created several conservation

programs, which will increase the need for employees trained in fields related to natural resources.

Horticulture is hot

Horticulture — particularly turf grass management — is another area both Newberg and Gaul say has provided a strong job market. They expect to see that area continue to grow, as well as landscape design and nursery production.

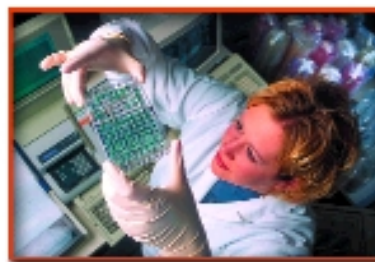
They attribute this to the popularity of golf and Americans valuing the looks of their lawns. Gaul says, “With the economy as it is, people seem to be traveling less and investing more in their properties by upgrading yards, landscaping, etc.”

Traditional opportunities, too

Gaul says there are several traditional ag majors — such as ag business and agronomy — that are also good career builders. “These majors are so diverse and offer a lot of career paths you can go into, be it marketing, lending, sales, seed production, plant research, scouting, etc.”

Newberg reports that she’s seen a lot of students go into consulting and finance-related fields, which have traditionally been areas with strong career opportunities.

Careers within the communications field are also starting to pick up and “that should continue,” Gaul says.



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Recipe for success

Mike Gaul, director of Ag Career Services at Iowa State University (ISU), offers three tips that he says are key for college students to land a successful career:

- (1) Do well academically. "It's basic, but it's true," he says.
- (2) Take advantage of internships. "We tell students they'd best have two or three internships when they graduate. It gives you relevant experience, and you are building yourself and enhancing your résumé," he says.
- (3) Get involved on campus or in the community. "Don't just be a member, be an active member," Gaul says. "This is really a chance to strengthen your interpersonal and communication skills. And communication is critical to being a success."

He adds, "A degree is not an automatic meal ticket to a job. It's those three things. The opportunities are out there — it's just a matter of how hard you want to work."

Many students also find their way back to production agriculture. "When I follow up with graduates, I'm always pleasantly surprised to find students who do return to the farm," Gaul says. He reports that 15%-16% of ISU's graduates go back to the family farm, "and that number seems to be pretty steady."

From the U of M's annual report, Newberg says 3% of their students go directly into production ag after graduation, while 35% of graduates work in agribusiness. "This shows that there are far more opportunities within agriculture than just those on the production side. But I think there will always be students interested in production ag — if they can find the start-up opportunities," Newberg says.

And, no matter if students are on the farm or in agribusiness, Newberg says that recognizing international issues is essential. "The global market in which agriculture functions requires all sectors to have a solid understanding of international issues that affect the industry," she says.


More students needed

Despite the career opportunities ahead, Gaul says, "The number of students

enrolling in ag is not growing by leaps and bounds." He says that, in itself, will create future job openings. "With enrollment in ag majors down, there aren't the competitive numbers of graduates seeking jobs," he says.

"Right now, people in the general business sector are struggling to find jobs because there are so many graduates in that field. So if you have an interest in ag, it pays to specialize in ag business rather than in general business, because you are likely to have more job opportunities when you graduate," he adds.

Gaul says a second reason the outlook for ag jobs is optimistic is based on the aging population of employees in agriculture. Some estimates call for more than one-third of these folks to retire in the next five to 10 years. "As they retire, that is going to create opportunities for middle and upper management positions within ag companies," Gaul says.

Newberg agrees that more students need to be recruited. "There is a movement within the industry to educate people about opportunities in ag. The big challenge is to redefine what ag is. It still [includes] the traditional jobs, but now it includes so much more." 

Find your career niche

What do you want to be when you grow up? If you're not sure, don't panic. Instead, the National FFA Organization suggests a three-step approach to planning your future.

1. Identify: A good starting point is to list what skills you have and what type of work you like to do. Then, determine possible careers that match your skills and desires. Review these possible occupations in terms of long- and short-term goals. Finally, make a list of all the positives and negatives of the position and refine your decisions.
2. Search: Learn what training is required in your chosen area, and develop a strategy to obtain a position in the field of your choice.
3. Take action: Develop your job search strategy, develop a solid résumé, gain experience through internships and summer jobs, gather prospective company information, and apply for the job!