

'Where', not 'Who' is key to ag job opportunities

UNIVERSITY PARK — Job hunters will tell you it's not what you know, but who you know that counts when looking for a job. Graduating agricultural students, however, will tell you it's not who you know, but where you are, that's important.

Faculty from The Pennsylvania State University's College of Agriculture believe that their graduates may see a stable job market with vacancies for qualified applicants. But researchers at the University of Nebraska say Midwestern agricultural students will have trouble finding work after graduation this year because of a poor business climate and a sagging farm economy.

"One thing our students have going for them is that they're here in the Northeast," says James Phillip Bucher, assistant director of placement services at Penn State. "They have more opportunities with small agribusiness operations."

Penn State and other Northeastern schools offering agricultural majors are currently more successful in job placement because of their diverse programs. Northeastern schools are based less on production agriculture.

"Our graduates do more than farm," Director of the College of Agriculture's Undergraduate Student Affairs, James McCoy says. "Pennsylvania's processed food base is as vital to state agriculture as our production base."

Agricultural placement in non-food related fields is also healthy. Kim C. Steiner, associate professor of forest genetics, says this year's strong forestry job market is "as healthy as it was last year, maybe even better."

Associate professor of food science Edward Glass says food science graduates are experiencing no difficulty in finding profession related entry-level job opportunities. Annual starting salaries for food science graduates average around \$20,000, Glass says, and no one in this year's graduating class accepted a job offer under \$15,500 a year.

Positions in agricultural economics and business are plentiful, says associate professor

of agricultural economics Tom Brewer.

"Opportunities aren't as plentiful as in the mid-70's, but hiring is pretty brisk, and salaries are a little higher this year," he says. "A wide variety of jobs are available to agricultural business management or agricultural economics graduates. Employers range from firms that supply farm inputs or services to jobs in food processing, distribution and retailing."

Jobs in dairy production—traditionally strong in Pennsylvania's farm economy—are not as available as jobs in other areas, but McCoy thinks that's because dairy employment figures may be difficult to pin down.

"If a student goes back to the family farm with his dairy science or dairy production degree, he may not consider himself employed," McCoy says. "They're a lot better off than statistics indicate... That's why we work hard to identify graduates with careers in production and business."

Another problem with agricultural job placement statistics is that they are taken from the select job market of on-campus recruiting. Yet most agricultural jobs are acquired through the employee's own initiative. On-campus recruiting statistics also ignore students who find jobs in agriculture, but not in their specific field of study.

Penn State has an eight-year record of steady agricultural graduates typically work in their field of study, but another 20 percent work in agricultural jobs outside their major. These figures are conservative, because they reflect the recent graduates' status two months after graduation, Bucher says.

"The key word is assertiveness," he says. "I'll bet a third of all ag majors that get a job in their field get it on their own initiative. Hiring in the agricultural job market is 95 percent invisible. To get jobs, ag majors must beat the bushes themselves."

To encourage agricultural

graduates to look for jobs themselves, Bucher urges students to think in terms of the kind of work they want to do, rather than trapping themselves in a specific job title. Once a year, he teaches a class in job hunting skills that's open to students throughout the college.

"There are tens of thousands of small agricultural employers. If each one hires only one person a year, that's a lot of jobs," Bucher says. "How can an ag major find out where they are? That's what we're trying to teach students here how to find the hidden job markets, how to be assertive, how to let employers know what you can do for them."

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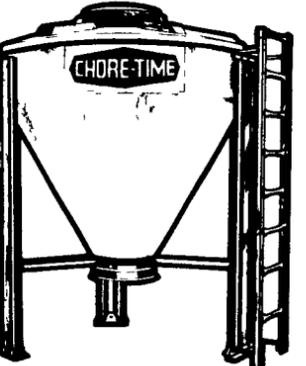
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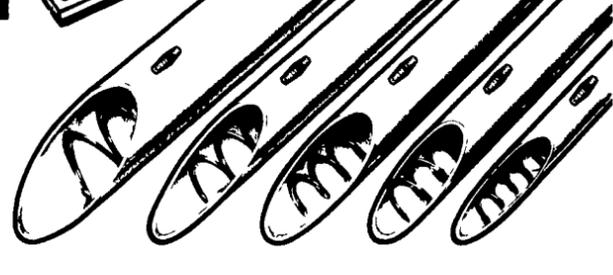
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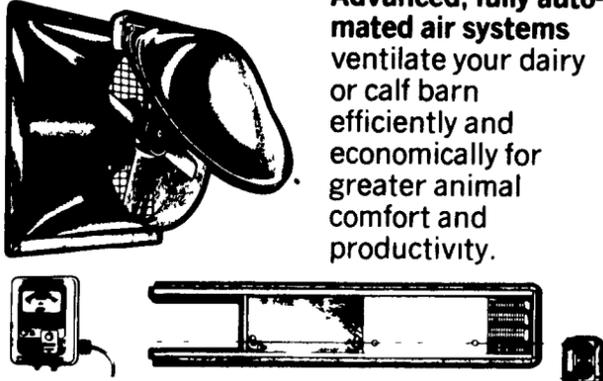
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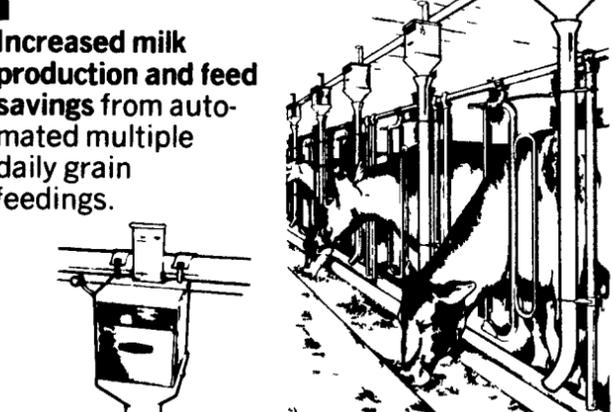
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