

Ryan Hrubes
PHOTO: BOB ELBERT

Breaking With TRADITION

Armed with a college education, farm kids with limited opportunities on the family operation are finding there are other ways to stay in agriculture. **BY CLAIRE VATH**

Growing up, Ryan Hrubes' chores included driving the tractor, harvesting and planting on the family's 1,200-acre row crop farm in north-central Iowa. In college he was heavily involved in the Iowa State University Ag Business Club, National Agri-Marketing Association and Agriculture Future of America. But when it came time to choose between the farm or an outside career, Hrubes picked the latter.

"I just saw opportunities that allowed me to develop a different skill set without the risk of farming," he explains.

Twenty-three-year-old Hrubes is a lot like other farm kids who leave the family operation to pursue a higher education and find, once they begin college, that other

paths can lead to a career in agriculture. Once realized, the bucolic ideal of returning to the family farm often gets pushed aside.

With his May 2010 graduation, Hrubes couldn't be picking a better time to enter the agriculture industry. Right now, it's downright hot.

Studies show strong hiring numbers, healthy salaries and a variety of opportunities for recent graduates.

And students are picking up on that. According to the USDA, enrollment numbers in the nation's colleges of agriculture increased almost 22% from 2005 to 2008.

A recent AgCareers.com survey showed that year to date, 10,304 ag industry positions have been posted on the company's web site. That contrasts to 7,264 jobs the same time last year—a jump of 30%. **AgCareers.com** is a North-Carolina-based web site devoted to agricultural job postings and with which Hrubes did an internship.

In 2009, the number of ag jobs across the United States and Canada totalled nearly 30,000, with more than 19,000 jobs concentrated in the Midwest. That's up nearly 10,000 jobs from 2007.

Also in 2009, says AgCareers.com, production, operations jobs, research and sales positions were the highest placed. Of the jobs posted on AgCareers.com, 65% required a bachelor's degree and another 11% required at least a master's.

USDA doesn't have official numbers on the amount of jobs, but a USDA report on employment opportunities predicted that the nation's colleges of agriculture will churn out 50 to 70% of the ag workforce. The study projected 52,000 annual job openings from 2005 to 2010 for new graduates with about 49,300 qualified graduates available for the positions each year.

After six internships with several companies, Hrubes was offered and accepted a job with Dow AgroSciences in Washington state.

LOOSENING MARKETS. So what's with the jump in jobs? Eric Spell, president of AgCareers.com, believes a few things have opened up the market based on the trends his company sees with employers and job seekers.

"We're still in the business of producing food; the world needs more food than ever. And to produce and get more efficient, the ag industry is afforded some opportunities."

For employers, farm kids like Hrubes are highly desirable because of their real-world knowledge of agriculture, not to mention their work ethic from growing up on a farm.

Much of the agriculture industry's allure to the younger generation is its variety. Students can pursue

anything from biotechnology, engineering and computers, to more traditional careers like animal husbandry and agribusiness.

Spell attributes the boom in traditional sectors as the solution to other shrinking professions. Pfizer is hiring animal husbandry graduates to educate producers on herd health. He believes these educators are necessary to make up for the shortage of large-animal vets on the ground.

Other areas of growth include agronomy, ag chemical sales and animal-health-related opportunities, though “biotechnology, machinery and equipment sales seem to be holding their own,” Spell says.

Kiley Harper-Larsen graduated from Auburn University’s agriculture program in 2005. Both sets of grandparents farmed, allowing Harper-Larsen early exposure to ag.

After graduation, she got a job as an Extension agent at the University of Florida, worked toward a master’s and then took a job as the food safety and compliance director for Hugh Branch Inc., the largest sweet corn distributor in the U.S., out of Pahoee, Fla.

Harper-Larsen and her husband also own their own small farming operation, and she’s happy with the decisions she’s made.

“North Alabama [where I grew up] only has farming for part of the year,” she explains. “I watched my grandparents work on equipment during the winter and financially struggle depending on the season’s crop.”

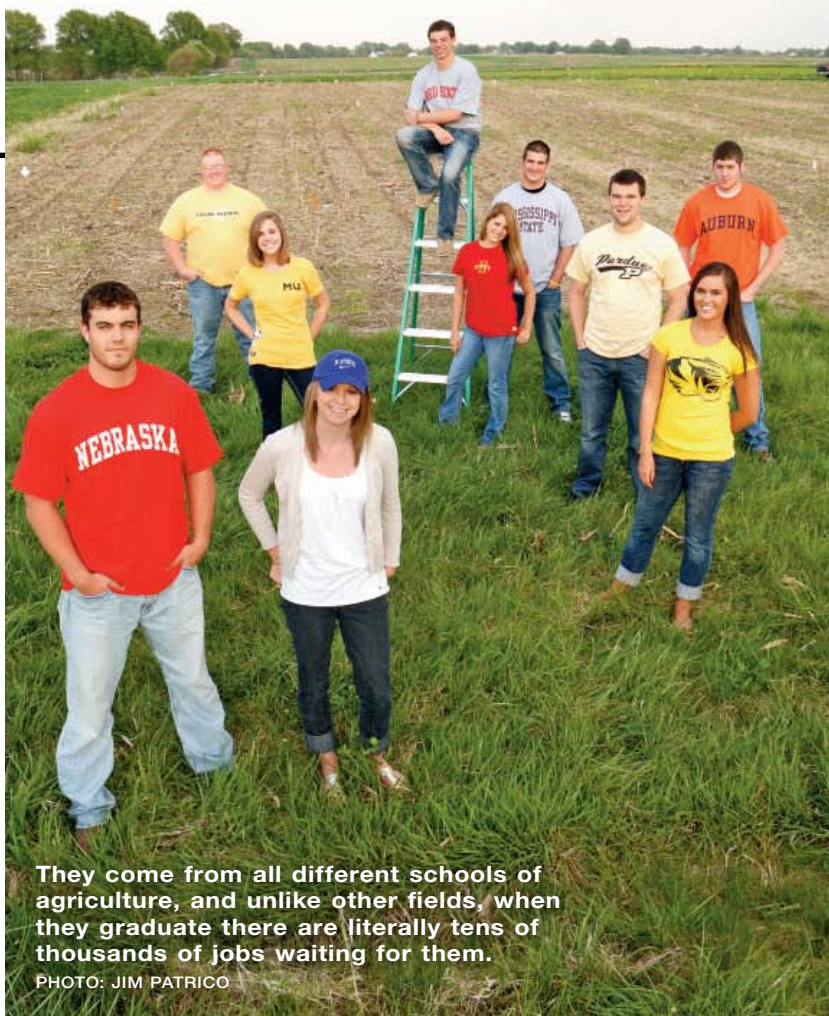
Harper-Larsen knew she wanted something a little different, “a little more exciting,” she says. Her days are varied and include everything from daily farm inspections, workplace compliance checks and employee training. “I feel like I’m preparing employees better for their jobs and the longevity of our company,” she says.

AGE CAVEAT. It’s not that students don’t have the desire to go back to the family farm, says Mike Gaul, director for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences career services at Iowa State University.

In fact, 10 to 15% of the students at ISU do. “There are a lot who would like to go back sooner than what conditions allow for, so they may be hopping into the job market instead.”

One of the biggest limiting factors is this: Their parents aren’t quite ready. Many of the recent graduates’ parents are mid- to upper Baby Boomers who aren’t at retirement age. Young adults see the high-risk, hard manual labor, lack of land and high inputs as turnoffs.

Plus, the money and experience of the ag industry are tantalizing to some. AgCareers.com found that



They come from all different schools of agriculture, and unlike other fields, when they graduate there are literally tens of thousands of jobs waiting for them.

PHOTO: JIM PATRICO

The TOP 10

There are scores of solid four-year agriculturally-rich colleges and universities across the country, so students have their pick. In November 2009, The Ohio State University conducted a study asking professionals to rank agriculture education-oriented programs.

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. University of Florida | 6. Oklahoma State University |
| 2. Texas A&M | 7. North Carolina State University |
| 3. The Ohio State University | 8. Pennsylvania State University |
| 4. University of Missouri | 9. Texas Tech University |
| 5. Iowa State University | 10. University of Arizona |

salary compensation varied widely across categories, but average salaries for a recent graduate with a bachelor’s degree ranged from \$39,666 to \$48,550. Gaul says he’s seeing many agribusinesses break the \$50,000 barrier for starting salaries.

While younger graduates tend to focus on the dollar figure, most of the companies also offered competitive and consistent health care coverage and 401(k)s. In some cases stock options, bonuses and relocation reimbursement were part of the employment package.

CURRICULUM CHALLENGES. As enrollment numbers in ag schools continue to increase, colleges and ▶

Securing a FUTURE

Early on at Iowa State University, Ryan Hrubes realized he needed to get in front of employers, so he took a job in the career services office and began applying for internships.

“That’s the only real-world experience you get,” he says. “Grades are important but there are people who are really smart but don’t know how a business works.”

Brett Bell, who recruits for Cargill AgHorizons, spends time looking for new recruits on college campuses. The No. 1 thing to getting a job, he says, echoing Hrubes’ belief, is internships.

“Students who do outstanding jobs in internship environments often have a full shot at jobs, especially within the company for which they intern,” says Bell. A typical internship lasts anywhere from 10 to 12 weeks, and 30% of the internships in an AgCareers.com study were in production/operation followed by sales and research.

Bell also recommends that students branch out and show diversity in internships instead of working for one organization. According to the “Intern and New Graduate Hiring Benchmark Analysis” by AgCareers.com, 63% of new graduate hires in 2009 had previous

internship or work experience. Bell also recommends the following for students looking for jobs:

- ▶ Network within the industry.
- ▶ Get involved in campus clubs that can give you access to companies.
- ▶ Do the kinds of work you want to do after college.
- ▶ Look at the ag industry as a whole. “There’s a lot to offer,” Bell says.
- ▶ Interview. The interview is extremely important because an employer can see “presence, a crisp delivery, what types of experiences the interviewee can draw upon and concrete examples to back up jobs on a resume.”
- ▶ Keep a good GPA—3.0 or higher. Says Bell: “This shows that a student has the ability to grasp material and perform at a good level.”
- ▶ Know when to look for jobs.

According to research done by AgCareers.com, July and October are prime searching months. “In July, employers start listing their positions to target university graduates,” says AgCareers.com’s Spell. “In October we see an increased combination of experienced full-time opportunities and summer internship listings.”

universities are faced with challenges in preparing and guiding students to get out in the workforce.

As they deal with employers and face graduation, students have to make some tough choices. One challenge, says Auburn student services coordinator Deborah Solie, is most students want to stay close to the farm even if they can’t go back. “They’re very geographically driven,” she says.

Louisiana State University agribusiness professor Dr. Steven Henning agrees, saying he’s seen a large number of students who want to be within an hour’s drive from the farm, which “isn’t always realistic,” he says.

Other challenges include the curricula itself. As the market determines jobs, traditional ag programs have had to adapt to meet the demand. Solie and Henning see a lot of students who continue on with their education to get a master’s because “that degree makes them more competitive,” says Solie.

“And students feel that staying in school buys them extra time in the job market.”

To meet the demand, Auburn is incorporating more

writing into courses. This comes after a number of ag employers say they want students with leadership qualities as well as excellent oral and written skills.

LSU, says Henning, is developing a personal finance concentration within the ag economics department to address other aspects of a successful farming or agribusiness venture.

“It’s not easy to think about 40 years in the future, and most of these students will be working for the next 50 years or so,” says Henning.

And universities have a major role to play in agriculture: They’re shaping the minds of future policy makers. Adds Solie: “These [students] will be the people answering the questions and solving the problems of the world.”

CARVING OUT A NICHE. Like Hrubes, Klaire O’Rourke also took a less traditional track. She left her family’s acreage just west of Des Moines, Iowa, for college at ISU.

O’Rourke’s involvement in leadership programs like FFA and 4-H helped shape her passion for agriculture, though, and in college she realized she “wanted to find a job to be as close to ag as possible and use that sense of passion for production.”

During college, she took internships with Bunge and the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation. But after graduation she began to search for something a little closer to her rural Iowa roots. Something that’s not at all uncommon in these times.

“I met an employer for Channel Bio [part of Monsanto] and helped him set up events for the Channel brand,” she says. “After that, my heart was set on public relations for ag companies.”

Since her college graduation two years ago, O’Rourke has worked in a full-time position that she essentially carved out herself with Channel Bio. She works hands-on with recruiting for the company’s internship program, helps with event planning for the company’s educational facility and works with grower customers—something she says is her favorite part of the job.

“Every day when I work with growers, they have the same passion for ag that I do,” she says. “At the end of the day we all want to keep feeding this growing population.” ●