

---

# A Leadership Development Course for Animal Industry Careers

M. A. Russell and H. W. Jones

## Abstract

A course designed to assist students in discovering more about themselves; in learning more about the career opportunities in animal agricultural; and in developing career plans and tools to help them market themselves. Animal Sciences 281, Career Planning in Animal Agriculture is a one credit-hour elective to be taken in the first semester of the second year of a Bachelor of Sciences curriculum. It is not a senior capstone seminar nor is it a freshman seminar to introduce the school and increase retention. Assignments and class activities include identifying student's likes and interests, accomplishments, skills, values, Myers Briggs Personality Type, a first impressions activity, faculty and industry interviews, interaction with invited industry employer-speakers, and a plan of study, practical work experience ideas and employer hit lists, an internship resume, and cover letters. The course requires students to independently evaluate themselves and plan their career goals and preparations. This paper is meant to assist those educators who are seeking ways to enhance science-based curriculum with career preparation and leadership development skills.

## Introduction

Constantly employers of agricultural school graduates express the opinion that students are technically very well educated, but could use more preparation in areas of people skills, communication skills, and focused preparation for their lives and careers. Communication is often noted as the most highly rated educational need (Bekkum, 1993) with problem solving and team building skills frequently mentioned.. Radhakrishna and Bruening (1994) reported that interpersonal skills, and business and economic skills are very important and that the experiences in industry internships and having worked on a farm/ranch are the most desirable previous work for employment. Many courses designed to prepare students to deal with issues in their chosen fields have been reported (Barkley, 1995; Wehner, 1995; Gleichsner, 1994), however it is the intent of this article to share our ideas about

the actual process of helping students in Animal Sciences learn more about themselves, what is available and needed by industry and consciously plan for their future.

Animal Sciences 281, Career Planning in Animal Agriculture, has been taught in the Animal Sciences Department for 25 years by Hobart Jones and now Mark Russell. It is a one-credit hour course designed to be taken in the first semester of the second year of a Bachelor of Sciences curriculum. Initially the strategy for the course was to expose students to industry leaders and employers and let the speakers share their opinions about background and preparation for careers in their field. Speakers were chosen to represent the four option choices within Animal Sciences at Purdue University: Animal Agribusiness, Animal Production and Management, Animal Products and Processing, and Animal Science/Pre-professional. The learning objectives of the course are continuing to evolved. Currently they are:

- discover more about themselves; their strengths, likes, values, personalities, skills and goals.
- learn more about the career opportunities in animal industry and the characteristics of successful employees,
- develop career plans, future preparations, and tools to help them market themselves for their chosen careers.

There are, consequently, a series of assignments that cause the students to reflect about themselves, interact with invited industry speakers and faculty, develop study and work experience plans, resumes, and cover letters. Students often accomplish these activities with their academic adviser, but it is more thorough and directed if these are actual assignments in a class for a grade. It should be noted that this second-year course is only one in a sequence of personal/career development courses and does not intend to add to the "freshman experience" described by Upcraft and Gardner (1993), nor add any technical content to their education. Students need to have experienced the rigor and "reality check" of the freshman year to maximize their openness to this self-evaluation and independent decisions about their career goals and plans. In the Purdue University School of Agriculture curriculum, these students have previously taken a general "Introduction to the Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource System" course as freshman, two English composition and two oral communication courses, and will take a senior "Issues in Animal Agriculture" seminar; each with different career skill development objectives.

---

Russell is a professor and Jones a professor-emeritus of Animal Sciences, School of Agriculture, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1151.

## Class Description

Since the Fall of 1990, the class has been offered in two one-hour sections in order to keep the class size to about 25. The course is an elective that is offered in the Fall semester only at 1:30 and 2:30 Wednesday afternoons so that outside speakers can join students for lunch and then address both sections. Through the Fall of 1994 a total of over 850 students have taken the course and since 1987, approximately 80% were in semester 3 or 4, 14% in semester 5 or 6, and those in semesters 7 or 8 accounted for 6%. In the last seven years, the class has been 49.5 % male and 50.5 % female. This gender balance is consistent with that reported for all institutions nationally with Animal Sciences constituting 49.5 % females compared with the agriculture, natural resources and forestry undergraduates as a whole being 35.8 % female (Litzenberg, 1994). This is important in defining the course objectives and assignments as Scofield (1994) showed that females have a higher expectation that the degree program will develop leadership skills, interpersonal and communication skills, understanding multicultural issues, and an international perspective than do males.

## Methods Used

Each assignment is graded on its thoroughness and completion consistent with directions, rather than its actual content. To encourage full participation and interaction students are given five points each time they attend and participate at expected levels. The details of the assignments as they were given to the students or experienced in class are clustered by learning objective rather than chronologically, and included below.

### Introspective assignments

The selection of an enjoyable career must begin with an honest and sincere review of personal attributes that affect success. Leading factors influencing students' career choice are "parents looking favorably upon the choice," "parents encouraging students to enter an occupation different than their own" and "the prestige associated with the occupation" (Scofield, 1994). Thus, having spent at least one year living independently away from family and home, these undergraduates are more receptive to intentionally looking closely at themselves. Personal leadership is often overlooked by students that hear all about the importance of interpersonal skills and building trusting relationships rather than what Covey, (1991) refers to as being "trustworthy at a personal level." We can help students develop competence but we can only make them aware of the importance of developing character.

1. Students are asked to submit a list of their top ten likes or interests, defined as things they most enjoy or like doing and list them in rank-order. This is given the first week and forces students to think about their personal priorities and reinforces the concept of needing to "like what you do."

2. The second week students are asked to develop a list of their top eight accomplishments they feel are most relevant

to their career. We define accomplishments as "those things in which the student has been involved, to include jobs, home responsibilities, clubs, teams, volunteer activities"—absolutely anything, they have done. Many students feel that at this stage of their life, they have accomplished very little, so this listing becomes a reinforcement of everything they actually have done which, before, they may have considered inconsequential. This, combined with the associated skills, also forms the initial list of activities for the resume.

3. The following week the assignment is to submit three skills that were learned, used, or developed while completing each of the listed accomplishments. There is a discussion in class about types of skills usually facilitated by asking the questions "What skills are essential for a successful students?" and then "What skills are essential for successful employees?" We cluster the resulting skills list into technical, people, knowledge and information skills. It seems that the listing of accomplishments and skills should be combined, but our experience has been that the students must have time to be impressed with their accomplishment list as a whole before they are asked to consider their skills audit. Getting students to actually identify transferable skills that have resulted from their responsibilities is essential as the beginning of their personal assessment and the skills resume.

4. In order to cause the student to consider their lives as a whole, we ask them to list their values. We define values as "those areas that are critical in realizing satisfaction and accomplishment in their career or entire life." Usually a great discussion follows about the difference between career values and personal values!! This exercise, more than any other assignment of the semester, causes the student and then the instructors to really reflect on what are important priorities. The reviewing and grading of these assignments are also very refreshing and encouraging for the instructors. This is often the first time that these students have ever sat down and actually listed, on paper, what is most important in their lives.

5. We administer the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to all students using Form G in class so that they will know more about themselves and their own personality preferences. MBTI results have been used to help people deal with others in teams (Myers and McCaulley, 1985), in education and learning (Brokaw et al., 1991), as well as in career counseling (Myers and McCaulley, 1985). The SN preference appears to be the most important in choosing occupation, while the student's EI preference seems to be the most important for finding an appropriate work setting within a particular occupation (Myers and McCaulley, 1985). We have a representative from the Dean of Students Office administer the MBTI in class and then return later in the semester to conduct a group activity to help students see the relevance of their type results.

6. A first impressions activity is conducted about five sessions into the semester to help students process the importance of first impressions and how they are formed. Because interviewers and employers emphasize the appearance and early professional impressions of candidates for jobs, we be-

lieve this is an important activity. The students are asked to take out a piece of paper and take one or two minutes to identify another student in class that they don't know very well and certainly didn't know before the semester began. They are asked to write down five impressions of this person. When all have done that, we ask them to list what caused them (what did they observe) to come to this conclusion. These are then handed in to the instructor, and at the next session selected examples are briefly shared with the class. One observation may say that the student is punctual, professional, very organized, and well educated because I observed that she/he is always here on time, is dressed neatly and appropriately, always has their assignment typed and ready to hand in and when they speak they make sense. Examples can be just as negative as this is positive. This exercise gives the instructor a chance to talk about "someone is always watching and you are always making an impression" types of issues like dress, behavior, etc.

All of the submitted lists and the MBTI are collected, graded, and then returned to the students in a manila envelope the seventh session of the 16 week semester. With this packet of information that represents the student and is entirely made up of their own submissions, each student has the task of defining a 5-10 year career goal AND an alternative goal that would be their second choice if the dream career wasn't attained. This assignment ends the "self direction and goal setting" aspect of the course.

### **Learning about the industry**

Much emphasis in our program is put on the students establishing networks both on campus, with students and faculty, and off campus in the industry of their choice. Additionally, the art of confidently interviewing is a very important criteria for employment selection and effectiveness on the job. These activities are designed to assist the development of these critical skills, provide students with more information about opportunities in their industry, and emphasize the importance of selected skills and characteristics.

1. The students are given a list of all Animal Sciences faculty and staff and told that they must conduct information-gathering interviews before the end of the seventh week. They may choose from the list or contact faculty in other related departments consistent with their interests. They are responsible for initiating the contact, for setting up the appointment, for conducting the interview, and for writing up a short summary of the discussion, emphasizing what they got out of or learned from the interview of the process. This activity has given the students an excuse to meet faculty with common interests that they might not have met until much later in their academic career, or at all. This has also helped students realize that the faculty can be a source of career information and how difficult it can be to arrange times with busy people. Faculty are very willing to give advice and interviewing suggestions to the students and have supported the activity if they are not expected to do them all in one week. The instructors promise the students that the faculty will not see

their summary write-ups and it is very revealing what some of them learn from the experience, both good and bad!

2. The students are expected to contact and interview at least one off-campus industry person and submit a summary of their experiences and what they gained from the exercise. The students find this activity more difficult and we strongly suggest that they reach outside of their known friends and "comfort zone" to use this opportunity to meet someone in their field of interest and either interview or shadow them for a day.

3. Each semester there are about seven invited speakers who are each asked to share a bit of their background and how they got from being a second year student in a university to where they are now. They address what they currently do, what characteristics make a person in their field successful, and what advice they have for student's preparation for those interested in entering the speaker's field. Speakers intentionally represent a wide variety of species enterprises and industries and may not relate directly to the chosen interests of the majority of the class. The instructors emphasize that the students should seek commonalities between the characteristics and preparations mentioned by various speakers. Students are assigned a speaker to whom they must direct questions after the presentation and all students are encouraged to sign up to join the speaker and the instructor for lunch (at their own expense). This informal lunch session has resulted in quite a few follow-up interviews and actual employment for assertive students.

### **Career preparation strategies & marketing tools:**

Beginning with the eighth week (of a sixteen-week semester) of class the self-analysis aspects of the course are complete. The students are now ready to develop an action plan to reach their chosen primary and alternative career goals. This includes both the work experience and education aspects of preparation and the marketing tools. There are many good resume books in the library and we also recommend "What Color is Your Parachute?" (Bolles, 1990).

1. Students must submit a plan of study for their remaining years at Purdue University or elsewhere to complete the degree requirements necessary for their chosen career. This must be a semester-by-semester plan which includes all of the required courses in the required sequence. Purdue has a one-on-one faculty adviser system for registering for classes and often this assignment causes the student and their adviser to have the planning discussion that they should all have anyway. This exercise is an excellent reality check and preliminary audit of their progress. Since not all of the students are sophomores, this assignment can be modified for upperclassmen to include company training programs, agribusiness annual reports, or perspective employers.

2. Students are required to list five ideas of practical work experience that will benefit their preparation for their chosen field. These can be summer experiences, during the semester employment, or other experiences including legislative internships, study abroad programs, and volunteer ser-

vices experiences. Bekkum (1993) reported that although this varied by industry type, the type of work experience valued most highly by employers was "previously worked part time on a farm or in agribusiness", followed closely by "reared on a farm," and "summer internship at an agribusiness while in college." Along with the list of experiences, each student must submit the names and addresses of at least two real contacts that could be approached to obtain the indicated experiences. In other words, put real names and faces to the experiences instead of just speculating. This is the beginning of the student's "hit list" that will be used later on for resume distribution and telephoning.

3. An internship resume must be drafted and submitted for editing by the end of the 12th week. The instructor dedicates one class session to the discussion of designing skill, chronological, and employment resumes and effective cover letters. There are good business letter writing, small group discussion, and interviewing courses at Purdue University, but it seems that the review of good and bad examples of resumes and cover letters is helpful to the students.

4. By the end of the 15th week a cover letter must be written to an employer and submitted to the instructor for editing and review. These must be three paragraphs in length, typed on a word processor, and addressed to one of the contacts submitted and include an action oriented follow-up to the letter. A list of four references should also be submitted with the cover letter with titles, addresses and telephone numbers. It is expected that these references, letters, and resumes will vary with the position being pursued, but the drafts and the list of references force the student to do the bulk of the thinking and preparation needed.

## Conclusion

It is very useful for the students to take a course in which they are solely there to reflect upon their own future and its planning. Many would argue that this type of course is not worthy of academic credit and contains material that the student should seek out on their own. As the search for positions becomes more competitive and the employers seek more prepared interviewers and potential industry leaders, we believe that a course like this is just as critical to successful employment as is some of the technical courses. We have had many students come back years later and tell us that (in retrospect) the forced self-evaluation was very enlightening. Many students over the years have expressed that they thought they wanted a career with animals and decided, after taking this class, to major in criminal justice, psychology, education, etc.. We believe that we did these students (and the animal industry) as much good as those that we have encouraged and reinforced their interest in animals. Without the

emphasis of this course on forced counseling and career development, many undergraduates don't ask themselves some of these difficult questions until they are preparing to graduate from college and seek employment.

According to Oliver (1991), agribusiness is looking for students that 1) have demonstrated leadership within a team environment, 2) know that the technical base is necessary but recognize first and foremost that the world is a people place, 3) are aware of the big picture, and 4) have a sense of direction and vision. We may not be able to create their vision but we can create an avenue to help students with their direction.

## References:

- Barkley, A.P., 1995, Students Thinking Critically about Agricultural Issues, *NACTA Journal*, 39 (1) 4-9.
- Bekkum, V.A., 1993, How Does Agricultural Business and Industry View a College Education in the 90s? *NACTA Journal*, 37, (3) 12.
- Bekkum, V.A., 1993, Experience Needs of College of Agriculture Graduates as Perceived by Business and Industry, *NACTA Journal*, 37, (2) 48-51.
- Bolles, R.N. 1990. *What Color is your Parachute?: a practical manual for job hunters and career-changers*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Brokaw, B. E., Mills, F.D. and McKelvain, W. R.. 1991. Student Interests/Personality Type Assessment of Agriculture Majors at a Private, Liberal Arts University: Implications for Program Enhancement for Leadership Development. *NACTA Journal*, 35 (3) 21.
- Covey, S.R.. 1991. *Principle-Centered Leadership*. Fireside Books, Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, NY. 28-31.
- Gleichsner, J. A., 1994, Using Journal Articles to Integrate Critical Thinking with Computer and Writing Skills, *NACTA Journal*, 38 (4) 34-35.
- Litzenberg, K. 1994. *Abridged Fall 1994 National Enrollment Report, Food and Agriculture Education Information System*, College Station, TX
- Myers, I.B. and McCaulley, M.H., 1985. *Manual: A guide to the development and use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, CA. 78-88.
- Oliver, J.P. 1991. Employing Leaders, *NACTA Journal*. 35 (3), 7-9.
- Radhakrishna, R.B. and Bruening, T.H.. 1994. Pennsylvania Study: Employee and Student Perceptions of Skills and Experiences Needed for Careers in Agribusiness. *NACTA Journal*, 38 (1) 15-18
- Scofield, G.G.. 1994. An Iowa Study: Factors Affecting Agricultural Students Career Choice. *NACTA Journal*, 38 (4) 28-30.
- Upcraft, M.L. and Gardner, J.N.. 1989. *The Freshman Seminar section 3, in The Freshman Experience*. Jossey-Barr Inc., San Francisco, CA.
- Wehner, D.J., 1995, Issues Facing Professionals in Agriculture: A Communications-Intensive Course. *NACTA Journal* 39 (1) 10-13.