

# Meat Science Education in the Future: Thoughts of Industry

Carol A. Ploch\*

Does anyone here know an 18 year old girl away at college? If so, maybe you can relate to the following letter from an 18 year old girl who went away to college and is writing home to her parents:

Dear Mom & Dad:

My first semester at college has been interesting and unusual. I've dropped out of the dorm in the last few weeks and am now living off campus with a boy named Chris.

Our phone has been disconnected 'cause Chris is as broke as I am. I'm four months pregnant, but don't worry, 'cause Chris is planning on marrying me after the baby is born. I love you both very much.

Your daughter, Karen

How would you feel? (Three days later a second letter arrives)

Hi again Mom & Dad:

I hope you are not upset by my last letter. There's no reason to be. I'm still in school, there's no boy named Chris and I'm certainly not pregnant.

You might wonder why I wrote you the letter the other day. It's simple. I got two D's and two F's in my final grades and wanted you to see things in their proper perspective.

Love, Karen

In preparing this talk I tried to keep things in their proper perspective. I researched major food and meat companies and feel that the overall picture that I present here fairly represents those industries. The points I will cover today are:

1. Types of positions available in the meat industry.
2. Qualities industry looks for in the people they hire.
3. The campus interview.
4. Career counseling.

Meat science educators across the country have done an excellent job of teaching students the technical and practical aspects of the meat business. The programs are well organized and solid. In recent years we have been pleased to see increased numbers of business courses in the curriculum. Courses in Animal and Meat Science, Food Science, Food Science and Technology, coupled with various business courses such as General Business, Accounting, Personnel and Human Relations, provide an excellent educational background for entry into the food industry.

With such background, undergraduate and graduate level students have the opportunity for jobs in Production Supervision, Quality Assurance, Consumer Products Sales, Food Service Sales, Materials Management, Production and Inventory Control, Industrial Engineering, Purchasing and Research and Development.

Industry looks for many qualities in the students they interview: what courses were taken, who taught the courses, what overall grade point average was achieved, the student's grade point average in his major courses. We have great interest in the curriculum itself for diversity and content as well as the success a student has in the grades he achieves. This should give us an idea of his ability to learn as well as his interest in his coursework. If he experiences success in his coursework, chances are he should be able to learn the technical aspects required for success in the business world.

The extent of one's campus activities and professional involvement is another important consideration in a company's selection of a candidate. Students should be encouraged to become actively involved with campus activities such as Block & Bridle, Saddle & Sirloin, the Food Science Club, Meats & Livestock Judging as well as other on-campus organizations that may or may not be agriculture related. Professional organizations such as Institute of Food Technology, American Meat Science Association and others provide an excellent opportunity for students to become exposed to or actively involved in, the major issues facing the industry today. These groups also provide exposure to practical implications of our business that often are not fully covered in the classroom.

Professors should encourage students to become involved in these organizations and, more importantly, seek out leadership positions within them. This point cannot be stressed enough. It is very good to join organizations, but a leadership role requires practice in speaking before groups, organizing, planning, delegating and being the motivational spark plug to get things done.

Practical, work-related experience is invaluable in terms of preparing a student for an entry level position in the meat industry. Many companies hire summer relief supervisors as well as plant workers for temporary assignments. These jobs would give a student exposure to industrial plant environments as well as knowledge of different types of work assignments, and best of all, a way to meet the people who currently hold these positions and tap their resources.

Many times a summer job will help a student to know more clearly where his area of interest lies before seeking his first full-time job. A corporate recruiter with one of the top food processors in the country relates, "students in agriculture

\*Carol A. Ploch, Corporate Recruiting Manager, Oscar Mayer & Co., P.O. Box 7188, Madison, WI 53707

need more work experience. This is the only way to get a realistic attitude toward business today. In this way, students will get a better idea of what the big picture is all about."

I had the "big picture" in mind when preparing this talk. I thought a lot about improving the product that you are providing to industry; that product being the student. I've already said that educators are doing a good job of teaching the technical aspects of the meat industry. I believe more attention must be paid to some non-technical areas. I spoke to a corporate recruiter for a major meat company in the U.S. a few days ago and his view was, "communication skills are lacking in both verbal and written capacities. Generally, students from the agricultural campuses are not obtaining the degree of communication skills we would like to see when they come to us for a job."

The first area for improvement has to do with the campus interview. Oscar Mayer & Co. conducts approximately 3,000 campus interviews each year and about 35% of these interviews are at agricultural campuses. Interviews are set up on a thirty minute basis, and the time allotted must be efficiently used for the interviewer to probe and acquire the information needed about a candidate in order to make a decision.

Many times the interview is wasted because students are not properly prepared. An interview is not the place for career counseling. Suppose a student is asked the questions, "what do you want to do upon graduation," or "where do you see yourself fitting into a position in the industry." If that student replies "well, that is a good question. I never really thought about it," or "I wanted to go to vet school and was not accepted so I majored in Animal Science," that reply might cost the student the chance for a second interview.

Another very common answer is: "I am most interested in an agriculture-related industry with the initial goal of getting into management." Many interviewers feel that students are not aware of the types of jobs available to them, which indicates that either (1) students are not seeking out the information on their own and/or (2) professors are not allotting the time with students to sufficiently counsel them. To give you an example of what I mean, many students have the preconceived idea that a position as a Quality Assurance Technologist is a laboratory job. At our company it is not and at many other companies it is not. Why do students think this? A position as a Q.A. Technologist is a supervisory one which requires a more technical degree and is certainly not just a "lab job."

One source a student may seek out for information is the Career Planning and Placement Center. Most campuses have one and it is an excellent means for students to research companies by utilizing the library information files. Additionally, a student can write directly to a company and request this information.

As I'm sure you can realize, it is very difficult for a student to formulate ideas regarding the start of his or her professional career without proper guidance and counsel. And it is in this area that further improvements can be made. Many times there are students who reach graduation without any ideas of what they want to do. This might be eliminated if thoughtful career counseling took place earlier.

Another recruiter from a major food company feels that students in general have no idea of what they want to do. If a student has no goals, how will he know if he's gotten to

where he wants to be. You, the instructor, spend a lot of time with these students and it really isn't fair when a student with good grades and performance and introverted personality is interested only in Sales and cannot find a job. This student should not be encouraged to pursue Sales. He should be counseled to pursue some other area depending on his or her particular abilities and qualities. I know that I have at times done this type of counseling and it can make a difference, not only with graduating seniors, but with freshmen and sophomores also.

In summary, in our company we look for the enthusiastic and self-confident individual that has the potential and capability to be a team player. This requires a good academic track record and the potential for leadership. We attempt to evaluate that *leadership potential* on past performance. It is the only indication we have with the exception of a basic intuitive feeling.

*Flexibility* is another key word. By this I mean the ability to perform well in a variety of job assignments. Ideally a person with this type of educational background has the ability to take on job assignments in Sales and Marketing, Quality Assurance, Production Supervision, Research and Development and others. The possibilities are numerous.

*Attitudes* are another area that we carefully weigh. If a student has a positive attitude and a realistic expectation regarding the input he or she can provide and the rewards that person can receive by joining a company, we look favorably upon that student. It is that attitude more than anything else in selecting a meaningful career that will affect a successful outcome.

If, on the other hand, a student is concerned only with "what the company can do for me" and the monetary aspect of the job, we tend to form a negative response to this type of attitude.

We want good technical minds with the capability to solve problems, to be innovative and be able to sell their ideas. We want people who are achievement and goal oriented, people who realize what business is all about. We want people who understand that we are in business to make a profit and that profit is not a dirty word.

Over the years we have hired individuals who have risen to top managerial positions. In looking over their history with the company, one can quickly detect that there is no clear-cut path one could plan and follow. In preparing this talk I came across an article directed at the Future Executive and a perspective by Harlan Cleveland who gives his views on the challenges of this position:

A career as an executive is not something you plan for yourself. It's the series of accidental changes of job and shifts of scenery on which you look back later, weaving through the story retroactively some thread of logic that was not visible at the time. If you try too carefully to plan your life, the danger is that you will succeed—succeed in narrowing your options, closing off avenues of adventure that cannot now be imagined, perhaps because they are not yet technologically possible. When a student asks me for career advice, I can only suggest that he or she opt for the most exciting "next step" without worrying where it will lead, and then work hard on the job in hand, not pine for the one in the bush. . . . When your job no longer demands of you more than you have, go and do something else. Always take by preference the job you don't know how to do. If you build into your life enough variety of experience, you will be training for leadership. . . .