

## Introduction

- On behalf of WSU, “Welcome to Seattle”
- Appreciate the invitation to speak to you today....
  - Topic suggested was...
  - Something we spend a great deal of time thinking about at WSU
- The title of the talk was, of course, inspired by the Pete Seager song of the 1960s and popularized by Peter, Paul and Mary
- My experience with this topic is very diverse.
  - Spent 20 years at OSU/KSU in a relatively high ag enrollment environment (fueled principally by traditional sources of ag majors – farm kids, or at least rural). Moved to WA where the demographics are much more challenging.

### (SLIDE)

In my 20 minutes, I want to accomplish three things:

1. Provide you an overview of the market situation for agricultural program graduates.
2. Discuss some of the factors contributing to this situation
3. Propose some university and industry actions that might prove useful in responding to the situation.

### (SLIDE)

## Market Situation for Agricultural Program Graduates

Supply:

- May be surprising, but there has been a significant increase in the number of graduates in ag and NR grads over the last 20 years
  - Number of degrees began to stabilize in late 1990s and into the start of the century
  - Increase somewhat artificial – dominated by growth in NR fields
  - Majority of the growth occurred in three areas: nat res mgmt, animal science, and agbus

### (SLIDE)

- One of the interesting demographic changes is that the gender composition of these graduates has changed radically in the last 20 years.
  - Gender: 2/3 males and 1/3 females in 1988, now nearly 50:50

### (SLIDE)

Demand:

- In terms of demand for ag majors, you most often you hear cited a USDA study conducted every 5 years which provides a projection of agriculture’s demand for graduates.
  - Summary data of four most recent studies presented here – shows projected job opening vs projected qualified graduates (ag and allied fields).
  - Similar conclusion to earlier data; increase in graduates with a leveling out after the turn of the century.
  - In terms of demand side, strong economic conditions in first five years of the century, led to job growth
  - Most recent 5-year study recently released, projects a decline from 2006 through 2010.

Labor supply gap:

- The difference between the red line and the top of the bar represents essentially a labor supply gap.
- Existed through the 1990s and widened further in last five years.

### **Factors Contributing to This Situation**

So, you probably have one of two reactions?

1. Hey, the gap is shrinking – problem solved!
2. If this is true, why do we have problems finding graduates to fill our positions?

The graph (and the numbers) does not tell the complete story.

- First, while the aggregate production of students may appear promising, we are not producing adequate numbers of students interested and/or prepared to work in production ag or fields serving production agriculture.
- In these fields, the labor gap is likely much wider.

**(SLIDE)**

Why are we not attracting adequate numbers of students into these fields?

- “All of the above”

Demographic issues

**(SLIDE)**

The traditional “pond” is getting smaller – fewer farms; fewer students from traditional ag backgrounds. Also, agriculture is a shrinking share of the overall economy.

- Obviously, a much bigger problem in the west. But this problem is revealing itself in the Midwest and Plains and will become more acute over time
- As economy has grown, more opportunities for all students, including agriculture majors. Allied fields and fields like agbus and animal science are going outside of production ag  
At KSU, first job of at least 40% of agbus graduates was outside food and ag.

**(SLIDE)**

Second major issue: perception of agriculture.

What drives students to choose a particular career?

Most of you with kids know this is not necessarily a scientific process.

Largely based upon perception, peer pressure and other factors.

Concerns of HS students – largely around reputation of agriculture as industry

Employment issues (Generation Y)

Upward mobility, salary, job flexibility (they control job, job does not control them), geographical preference, balance between work and personal time.

Some ag employers have not done a good job of accommodating the needs of generation Y employees.

### **Responses**

1. Raising awareness of agriculture.
  - Agriculture has a significant image problem
  - Hurts for those of us that love agriculture to hear this, but it is true.
  - The “A” word
  - Study by WSU Ag and Natural Resource Economics – conclusion: “use any name you want as long as it does not include “agriculture” in it!”
  - This is not a recruiting issue; these issues are ingrained long before college years.
  - Requires a significant commitment on the part of agriculture.

**(SLIDE)**

2. Communicate a more positive image of the “new agriculture”
  - It is high science (applied science)
  - Biotechnology, precision agriculture, etc.

**(SLIDE)** Think outside the barn! Move away from our conventional thinking...

**(SLIDE)** Don’t fish from the same small pond. Must attract students from non-rural.

3. Ride the “food” wave – suddenly, food is cool!

4. Modify curricula; not only for recruitment, but to train students for 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**(SLIDE)(SLIDE)**

- a. More attractive programs – AFS, V&E, organic agriculture.
  - Organic Agriculture – WSU – first organic major in US. Huge publicity!
  - Viticulture and enology – this is horticulture and food science; but it captures an enthusiasm that you don’t see with the former.

**(SLIDE)**

- b. Change how and what we teach! Skills and abilities desired by agribusiness
  - Teach students how to think, not what to think.
  - Eliminate the brain dump.
  - Ag and Food Systems degree

5. Industry-university partnerships

- Promotion of careers
- Industry-exposure internships
  - Very different objective than traditional internships
- Professional degrees
  - Train your own. Programs which provide employees without formal ag training the opportunity to pursue a formal degree in agriculture (MAB, MSAG)