

Want a Job? Major in Agriculture.

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U.S. colleges and universities award 35,400 degrees in agriculture each year, which is fewer than the ag industry needs.

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This year, nearly 2 million college students will graduate from college with a bachelor's degree. Will they find a job?

Yes, if they majored in agriculture.

According to a report released today by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Purdue University, employers have 57,900 job openings in agriculture and related fields each year. But just 35,400 students graduate annually with a bachelor's degree or higher in ag.

That adds up to a shortage of 22,500 ag graduates compared to the industry's needs.

"There is incredible opportunity for highly-skilled jobs in agriculture," U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said Monday. "Those receiving degrees in agricultural fields can expect to have ample career opportunities. Not only will those who study agriculture be likely to get well-paying jobs upon graduation, they will also have the satisfaction of working in a field that addresses some of the world's most pressing challenges. These jobs will only become more important as we continue to develop solutions to feed more than 9 billion people by 2050."

Those jobs will emerge in a wide variety of industries related to agriculture, food production, nutrition, science, biomaterials and more. Here are a few areas that researchers see as having the greatest potential for job seekers between 2015 and 2020:

Plant science. "Plant science graduates at all degree levels will find excellent career opportunities. They will find many opportunities for plant geneticists, plant pathologists, and insect biologists to develop higher-yielding crops adapted to less-than-optimal growing conditions. Demand also will be strong for expertise in production of sustainable products made from wood and other biomaterials."

Water management. “Concerns surrounding evolving water use and availability, especially in the western United States, will heighten the demand for watershed scientists, hydrologists, irrigation engineers, and plant geneticists.”

Veterinarians for food animals, especially in rural areas. “Graduates with expertise and experience in traditional food animal production, however, will be in demand, especially in poultry, dairy, and swine operations.”

Nutrition, both human and animal. “Consumer demand for nutritious and safe food will contribute to strong demand for food scientists and technologists in new product development, food processing, and food safety . Food-animal nutritionists will see a continued strong employment market in research and development programs connected with feed and animal-health companies.

Agricultural technology. As companies explore the precision ag space, they will be looking for job candidates with experience with software, hardware, and agriculture to develop and enhance their offerings.

Sustainable agriculture. As the number of specialty producers (fruits, vegetables, organic products, and more) grows, so will the need for knowledgeable workers and advisors. “Graduates with degrees in sustainable crop production and management will likely fare better in the employment market than will those with degrees in animal production and management.”

Management and business. This area contributes almost half the number of new ag-related jobs each year. “Most graduates with bachelor’s degrees in business management will enter sales and technical service jobs. Those with advanced degrees will more likely enter careers as economists, financial analysts, lending executives, marketing managers, and human resources specialists.”

No wonder college seniors majoring in ag are finding themselves juggling multiple offers, according to Iowa farmer Bill Horan.

In March, he told of biotech companies who have started recruiting college juniors for jobs, because all the seniors have already committed to an employer after weighing multiple job offers. “When you hear on the news about all these kids moving back into the basement of their parents, that’s not true in agriculture,” said Horan, speaking at a Capitol Hill gathering for National Ag Day.

To read the summary: “Employment Opportunities for College Graduate in Food, Agriculture, Renewable Natural Resources, and the Environment, United States, 2015-2020.”