



Science  
Societies

# Key to diversity in agriculture may be the job advertisement

By Gina Nichols

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*Illustration courtesy of Adobe Stock/Feodora.*

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We all know higher education lacks diversity. This is especially true in agriculture departments. While graduate student bodies in agriculture departments still have a long way to go (see ASA member Hannah Stroll's excellent essay on this topic<sup>1</sup>), they are far more diverse in gender, background, and culture than the faculty leading the department. For some, this is curious, and even confusing. We have diversity in the pipeline, but the pipeline seems to be leaking.



*Gina Nichols, Ph.D. candidate at Iowa State*

I am a Ph.D. student with hopes of graduating soon and am therefore looking for jobs. I am talented and also happen to be a woman. I am therefore in a unique position to provide insight to help agriculture departments understand why they may not have the gender diversity in faculty they would hope for. To be sure, there are people with much more knowledge, experience, and data on this subject than I. But I have a short-lived advantage in that I am living the experience.

I commend the Societies and *CSA News* magazine for their "Women in Science" programming. I think it is an excellent mechanism for sharing perspectives that may not otherwise be solicited. Here, I reflect on my job search and offer advice in four areas that I hope will be useful for departments as they seek to diversify their faculty.

### **1—Acknowledge Lack of Diversity**

When I first read a job advertisement, I go to the department's website. If I don't see women in Assistant, Associate, and Professor positions, a red flag goes off. That is to say, if you don't already have women in your department, even if you are a stellar department, you might have trouble convincing a woman to join.

I think one approach to addressing this on a university level is to do cluster hires, where tenure decisions are made by a program, not by the department. The Ohio State University hired its only woman in soil science through this mechanism. At the department level, I would consider explicitly acknowledging the problem. Consider the following statement:

*As a department that has historically struggled to attract diverse candidates, we are committed to ensuring a welcoming and inclusive environment for all applicants.*

I would eagerly forgive a department for its lack of diversity, given that phrase in a job ad.

## **2—Don't Write a Narrow Job Advertisement**

You want to hire someone with the capacity for and interest in applying their skills to study regional agriculture systems. Despite having the skills and interest, I can recall numerous positions I have not applied for only because they requested experience in a specific crop. As an example, consider the following statement:

*We are looking for a candidate with experience in rice systems.*

I would not apply for that position as I've never worked with rice. Consider an alternative wording:

*We are looking for a candidate interested in applying their skills to study the opportunities and challenges of rice systems in our state.*

I would excitedly apply for this position. I understand in some unique cases that you may want specific crop experience, but in general, I would argue it is not necessary. In fact, I believe agriculture would benefit from having fresh perspectives and energy applied to old problems in addition to harnessing the power of system–knowledge crossovers.

### **3—Sell the Position**

When I read a job advertisement for a position in an agricultural department, I invariably find the wording to be entitled and extractive. Often the ad is dedicated to what the applicant is expected to do. There is an assumption that you want the job. You might be wrong (see Point 1). This attitude is unique. Industry positions always start with a sales pitch—why do I want to work for this company? European and even Canadian academic positions likewise use salesman language. Advertisements from a U.S. agricultural department that say what the department will offer to the applicant are rare. I imagine a department could say, for example:

*Come work in a top agriculture department located in the heart of one of the most productive agricultural landscapes in the world. We maintain a collegial environment with vast opportunities for collaborations, professional development, and direct relations with farmers. As a department, we believe faculty do their best work when they have a healthy work–life balance, and we strive to support faculty in maintaining their physical and mental health.*

The lack of salesman language implies power, and it is, in my opinion, particularly detrimental to encouraging minority candidates. Using a welcoming tone acknowledges the applicant has agency, something many women and minorities have been historically denied. Furthermore, selling your position will become even more important as millennials begin to dominate job markets. This approach should be applied to all positions (masters, Ph.D., and post–doc).

## 4—Advertise Widely

There is no reason a plant biologist couldn't apply their knowledge to corn. There is no reason a biogeochemist couldn't apply their knowledge to nutrient cycling in agricultural systems. If you write a good ad (see Points 1–3), why not advertise to other societies? The American Geophysical Union, the American Society of Plant Biologists, and the Ecological Society of America (to name a few) certainly have members with skills that could be applied in an agriculture setting. Those societies also enjoy more equal gender representation compared with ASA, CSSA, and SSSA.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, you might wonder if I've applied for *any* positions. I have, and I recently accepted an academic position. I am not implying my experience and opinions reflect those of all women/minorities, but the rule of retail is that when one person complains, at least 10 others had the same complaint but didn't say anything. So while you are free to dismiss me as being picky, unrealistic, or unrepresentative, you can also consider the facts: I am a woman who will not be working in an agriculture department, perhaps solely because of the way the departments write job advertisements.

### Editor's note

This article is part of a series written by members of the Women in Science Committee, for all Society members. For more information, visit [www.agronomy.org/membership/women-in-science](http://www.agronomy.org/membership/women-in-science), [www.crops.org/membership/women-in-science](http://www.crops.org/membership/women-in-science), and [www.soils.org/membership/women-in-science](http://www.soils.org/membership/women-in-science).

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