ABSTRACT “What are you going to do next?” is a common question often asked of a student who has recently graduated with either an MSc or PhD degree. We should not be surprised to hear the answer “I do not know yet.” I have talked with many poultry science graduate students who usually start thinking about their future careers a few months before defending their thesis. I personally believe that nothing happens overnight in this world (excluding political-related issues), so we as graduate students need to have a comprehensible and pragmatic strategy when it comes to answering the question “What to do next?” This paper is not about how graduate students can find a job because there are numerous sources of information that are readily available elsewhere. One of the key messages of this paper is that networking is of paramount importance when it comes to moving in the right direction after graduation. Consequences of any decision made at this stage will often have a far-reaching unseen influence on us for many years into the future. I am also fully aware that there are many things over which we do not have any control, but as graduate students, are we doing our best to prepare ourselves for the real world?

As a graduate student, one of the main concerns that I have always had is what I am going to do after completing my graduate studies. I am fairly confident that other graduate students in every corner of the world have a similar concern (LinkedIn, 2009). This transition period is undoubtedly one of the most critical phases in the life of young professionals. It is the decision made here that will often determine in which direction their career track will take them during the rest of their lives. Do you think that you can meet the constantly evolving challenges and requirements of your new job (Pardue, 1997)? Will you be an asset to your profession?

Although being a graduate student is always associated with its own ups and downs, it seems that “graduating from a university is just a starting point for a long and challenging journey” (van der Sluis, 2005). Poultry science graduate students generally have the opportunity to pursue their careers in either academia or industry (van der Sluis, 2005; Pacific Egg and Poultry Association, 2009; Poultry Science Association, 2009). Based on what I have observed or often heard during the past few years, the chances of getting hired as a faculty member in poultry or animal science departments are not very promising, if not impossible in certain instances, because most institutions are cutting back on faculty positions due to increasing budgetary restrictions. Fortunately, there are still employment opportunities such as postdoctoral fellow or research associate positions. In comparison with academic-research centers, the poultry industry has more to offer, but on a competitive basis. Genetics, nutrition, health, live production, feed mill, hatchery, food science and processing, food safety, research and development, sales-marketing, and engineering are among the most common job categories found in the poultry industry (Pacific Egg and Poultry Association, 2009; Poultry Science Association, 2009).

INDUSTRY EXPECTATIONS

According to a survey conducted in the United States (Pardue, 1997), strong communication skills, general familiarity with business and economics, computing proficiency, and previous experience with the industry were among the most highly sought skills by the poultry industry. However, it must be noted that the nature of these expectations is not stagnant and changes constantly (Pardue, 1997; Barnes, 2001). It is argued that academia may not be able to respond effectively to these continual changes and as a result, graduates may not be familiar with these skills at time of graduation (Barnes, 2001).
To the best of my knowledge, I may not have all these qualifications desired by this dynamic industry. We as graduate students should make every effort to improve these skills as much as possible while we are still in school. Most courses that I have taken so far in graduate school have been heavily focused on technical knowledge of different aspects of poultry science. There is no doubt that we should be familiar with as many of these aspects as possible, but this knowledge may not necessarily guarantee our success in the industry (Pardue, 1997; Brake and Pardue, 1998). Poultry graduate courses should have a balanced combination of scientific and industry-oriented content (Yegani, 2009a). Offering courses on contemporary issues occurring at the national and international levels can definitely provide a broader perspective, which can subsequently open up more windows of opportunity for the graduate students upon their graduation (Lukefahr, 1999; Swanson, 1999).

The poultry industry currently seems to be focusing less on technical skills and more on abilities such as people and business skills. Graduate students should try to develop these skills to remain competitive in the job market (Pardue, 1997; Brake and Pardue, 1998). This competitiveness becomes even more obvious with the progressive trend of solidification in the poultry industry and global economic volatility (Barnes, 2001). It has been suggested that general familiarity with business, economics, and social sciences is of critical importance to better understand the intricacies of the poultry industry especially when it comes to decision making at production and marketing levels (Kridler, 1964; Pardue, 1997; Brake and Pardue, 1998; Barnes, 2001; Shane, 2003; van der Sluis, 2005).

Graduate students as leaders of tomorrow will also be evaluated based on their personal characteristics such as integrity, keenness, willingness to accept responsibility, and their ability to make meaningful decisions while working as a team member with others within an organization (Kridler, 1964). We need to realize that our decisions made at any stage of life may not always be correct. Everybody makes mistakes and this is an undeniable reality of life. However, it is very important that we learn from our mistakes.

Specialization is a trend that we have been observing not only in the poultry industry but in many other industries over the past few years. This process requires graduate students to take specialized courses in poultry or animal science departments as well as in other departments throughout a university (Brake and Pardue, 1998; Shane, 2003). Specializations in various areas including genetics, food safety, waste management, welfare, and economics are a few examples of disciplines of fundamental importance to the poultry industry (Swanson, 1999; Shane, 2003). On the other hand, it is critically important that our teaching and research programs be up to date and relevant to different sectors of the poultry industry. These state-of-the-art programs provide an excellent opportunity for graduate students to become familiar with the real world challenges that they will face upon their graduation (Denton, 1998).

NETWORKING

Do you believe in networking? Why should graduate students have strong networking skills? How can we expand our network? It is very important for all graduate students to publish their research findings in peer-reviewed journals or in popular industry-based magazines (presented in a more practical way). This is the first step that exposes us to professionals from other universities and organizations outside of our own laboratory group or department and university (Scanes, 2009).

It is also very important that graduate students make every effort to attend national or international meetings where they will have the opportunity to present their research data in the form of a poster or oral presentation. It is this type of exposure that provides an excellent avenue to meet people from different sectors including other universities. There is the possibility that funding or even employment opportunities will result from attending and participating in these meetings (Linkedin, 2009; Scanes, 2009).

Many graduate students do not take full advantage of these types of interactions because they usually tend to spend more time with people from their home university who are also attending these meetings. We need to fully participate by trying to attend as many presentations as possible and also by visiting the exhibition that is usually held adjacent to the conference rooms. I am aware that it may not be easy to do all of this within a short period of time, but it is a pragmatic approach to meet people with a wide range of scientific or business experiences (Linkedin, 2009).

Another practical way of making new connections is through online professional networking Web sites such as Linkedin (Linkedin, 2009; Yegani, 2009b). At the time of writing this paper, I had the opportunity to ask members of a specific group on Linkedin for advice and they kindly shared their invaluable experiences with me (Linkedin, 2009). These Web sites are an effective tool available to graduate students to expand their professional network (Linkedin, 2009; Yegani, 2009b).

If we want to work in the poultry industry, then we need to have a mindset that is different from that which we should have if we are leaning toward academia. We should try to attain pertinent experiences and expose ourselves to challenges while we are still in graduate school. Internship programs, summer projects, and volunteer activities provide excellent opportunities to obtain these types of experiences (Pardue, 1997; Linkedin, 2009). The reality is that profitability is a vital component of the poultry industry and it is natural to see that the industry is interested in investing more in people who can help to obtain a greater return on their investment (Linkedin, 2009).

Another realistic means of networking is to try to make strong connections with the alumni of your de-
partment or university, especially the ones who are active in the same field (e.g., the industry). These individuals can be a great source of information for graduate students because they have already been through the transition phase. Your advisor and advisory committee can help you to get in touch with the alumni (Linkedin, 2009).

**SOURCES OF SUPPORT**

In my opinion, the first and most important source of support for us as graduate students is our advisors. Advisors should help graduate students to develop the necessary skills in thorough and critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to work with others (Krider, 1964; Taylor, 2009). Students’ progress in these areas should be monitored by their advisors through a productive and rational approach. Imposing unrealistic demands on graduate students does not help them to become more creative.

The advisor-student relationship is a 2-way street. This means that we, as graduate students, should effectively interact with our advisors and others within the system to learn from them. Learning is a nonstop process because there is always something new (on a daily basis) to learn in our personal and professional lives. Poultry professional organizations such as the Poultry Science Association, American Association of Avian Pathologists, World’s Poultry Science Association, and World Veterinary Poultry Association should also help their student membership, through different programs, to become more familiar with the challenges that they may face in their careers (Yegani, 2009a).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Graduate students are normally considered the next generation of experts who will be involved in a wide variety of work settings. Thinking outside of the box is of fundamental importance for them (Swanson, 1999). Graduate studies at universities should not focus only on science, and enhancement of communication and team-working skills of students must also be a part of our graduate education. These skills will definitely be of significant help in our future careers (Chamblee and Morgan, 2009). The commercial poultry industry has undergone dramatic changes over the past 20 yr. It is up to us as the next generation of energetic and highly educated professionals to take the lead as generations before have done.

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**REFERENCES**


