

By Kelly de la Rocha

More college students turning to agriculture programs



Zec Kehoe, a first-year animal science major at SUNY Cobleskill, feeds cows on Tuesday.

CAPITAL REGION – Elizabeth Goblet was raised on a livestock farm in Schoharie and is planning her future there. Growing up, she learned all about tending sheep and beef cattle and growing hay, but additional skills were needed to keep the business profitable.

Now a senior in SUNY Cobleskill's agricultural business program, Goblet is taking her book-learning back to the farm.

"I have learned financial management, I have learned accounting and balance sheets; we took an entire course just specifically on taxes," she said. "You don't realize it until you actually use it, but there's no doubt about it that a degree in agriculture is going to help the producer."

Goblet is one of an increasing number of students attending college to learn the ins and outs of agriculture – not just the basics of growing crops and keeping livestock, but all of the intricacies involved, from production to plate. And colleges say more employers than ever are out there recruiting agriculture grads.

National undergraduate enrollment in colleges and departments of agriculture has been on the upswing, according to data obtained from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Agricultural Education Information System. From 2006 to 2011, the figures show enrollment nationwide increased by about 26,000, to a total of more than 146,000 students.

New York state's enrollment in agricultural programs ranks fourth in the nation for bachelor's and associate's degrees combined, and third for associate's degrees alone, according to Bill Richardson, director of the Food and Agriculture Information System. But the trend in New York is flat and falling back, he added.

"This indicates a strong history in investing in training for farmers, but also a loss of focus in recent years," he said in an email.

Officials at New York state colleges that offer agricultural degrees disagree. They say enrollment in many agricultural majors is going nowhere but up, and programs are being expanded to accommodate the influx of students.

At SUNY Cobleskill, enrollment in agricultural programs has grown by about 20 percent over the past five years, according to Tim Moore, dean of the college's School of Agriculture and Natural Resources. He credits the increase in part to a greater connection between consumers and their food supply.

"I think there's perceptions out in society that our food supply may not be as healthy for us, so I know that a number of students want to get involved with that to try to make a difference," he said.

The student body enrolled in agricultural majors is diverse, said Jason Evans, an assistant professor of agricultural business at the college. Many, like Goblet, grew up on farms and want to keep them running. Others have no farming experience and are simply interested in food systems.

Fewer students are studying production agriculture, while more are focusing on industries that support it, like marketing, credit, machinery manufacturing and product distribution, he said.

Applications for Cobleskill's agricultural programs are starting to pour in for the fall 2013 semester and the numbers are already higher than they have ever been, Evans said.

"We will probably, starting next semester, have to offer multiple sections of individual courses, where we have not had to do that before in agricultural business," he noted.

In September, the college began construction on a new, \$45.5 million Center for Agriculture and Natural Resources, and in January, it was awarded nearly \$140,000 in funding from the USDA to help create a baccalaureate program in food systems and technology.

“Our goal is to try to help students prepare to enter anywhere along the food chain so that they can either be focused on production or all of those steps that happen after products are made at the farm level,” Moore said. More companies, and a wider variety of them, are looking to recruit agriculture students for internships and full-time employment, he said.

“This is our first year crafting an internship program with Chobani,” Evans said of the yogurt maker, which has a production facility in the Otsego County hamlet of South Edmeston. “I have two students there right now that are essentially shadowing management, which is an excellent experience. It’s one of the fastest growing companies in the world.”

Cobleskill senior Thomas Latzkowski didn’t grow up on a farm but majored in agricultural business, with an aim to work in management for a non-production agricultural firm. Last year, he did an internship in quality control with A.J. Trucco, a fruit and nut importer and distributor, and is hoping to learn more about management there this summer.

He said he sees plenty of potential employers at career fairs.

“The great thing about ag business is it’s broad enough where you can apply your talents to any business, and with the growth in the agriculture industry, you’re not limiting yourself,” he said.

A 2012 report by Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce found the unemployment rate for recent graduates who studied agriculture and natural resources stood at 7 percent – the third-lowest rate among 16 degree programs surveyed.

Several years ago, Cornell University began developing new agriculture majors to meet growing student demand, according to Ann LaFave, director of student services for Cornell’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. One resulting major – agriculture sciences – now includes close to 100 students. A grape-growing and wine-making major, which had its first graduates in 2009, includes more than 50 students.

“Globally, there is just a big demand for agriculture in many facets,” LaFave said.

She noted that the college has seen increased interest from large, national companies like Driscoll’s and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, which are looking for graduates with agriculture backgrounds.

“We attract a lot of businesses here looking to hire [agriculture] students in a variety of things,” she said.

“Marketing, sales and research and development are three of the big areas.”