

BECOMING A PLANT DOCTOR

Program offers broad focus of study for new job markets in agriculture ■ By Colleen Scherer, managing editor

The world has doctors for animals and humans, but programs that create doctors of plants are new. The University of Florida started its Doctor of Plant Medicine (D.P.M.) degree with the first students entering the Plant Medicine Program in 2000. The program has had 32 graduates, and 30 students are currently enrolled in the rapidly growing degree program.

The University of Nebraska is establishing a similar nonthesis Doctor of Plant Health program. “We have been working on this since 2005,” says Anne Vidaver, professor of plant pathology and interim director of the Doctor of Plant Health program, University of Nebraska. “We hoped that we would be ready for the first class this fall.”

Vidaver says the process for the program to be approved still requires multiple approvals before it can begin. She acknowledges that Nebraska’s program is essentially the same as the University of Florida Plant Medicine Program, but Nebraska’s program will be adapted for the Midwest and regional expertise.

The Florida D.P.M. is a professional doctoral degree modeled after the veterinary medicine D.V.M. and the human medicine M.D. degrees. “There is a need for more generalist Plant Doctors to fill roles within the government, education and crop consultant positions, just to name a few,” says Robert J. McGovern, professor and director of the Plant Medicine Program at the University of Florida. “There really is a global need for this type of knowledge.

This program integrates all of the agricultural sciences.

When students have completed the D.P.M., they will have the training needed to function effectively across agricultural science disciplines (plant pathology, entomology, crop science, etc.), to meet the needs of U.S. and world agriculture” McGovern says.

McGovern pointed out that currently there are de facto plant doctors who have academic training in single disciplines but have developed expertise in other areas through self-tutelage and years of on-the-job experience. He feels that the D.P.M. will “jump start the careers of the next generation of crop consultants.”

The Florida program requires students take 90 credits of graduate courses and 30 credits of internships, emphasizing real-world experience. Nebraska’s program graduation requirements are expected to be similar to Florida’s with a strong emphasis on internships as well.

Vidaver compares Nebraska’s planned Doctor of Plant Health degree to a Doctor of Public Health. “Because we are dealing with populations of plants, and doctors of public health are looking at diseases that may occur; that is basically what we want to do with plants.”

Vidaver says, “We were originally skeptical about employment potential except that this is the only time in my nearly 40-year career in which we had people from within industry and government come to ask us to do this as opposed to our thinking that the world needs this. They asked us to do this, and

the Florida experience is that everyone graduating, from my understanding, has had good employment opportunities.”

The Florida program has indeed prepared graduates for real-world careers. Dan Sonke graduated from the Florida program December 2005. He is currently the director of technical and scientific programs at Protected Harvest, a California-based nonprofit organization that independently certifies farmers’ use of stringent environmentally compatible growing standards.

“What attracted me to the UF Plant Medicine Program was the practical application side to the degree and that it was a nonresearch degree,” Sonke says. “Despite that, it is a very rigorous program.”

Sonke says the program matched him perfectly with the type of job he does now. He works with grower groups nationwide to develop comprehensive sustainable agriculture standards. True to what McGovern said earlier, Sonke says he had little difficulty finding work after he graduated. He also serves on a work group for the Environmental Protection Agency studying the phase out of a pesticide over the next five years; he is helping to write practices for California agriculture’s transition into alternatives.

Sonke says, “I think this degree was originally intended for crop consultants, but it’s become a much broader degree especially now that the government has taken a stronger look at food safety. As a result, there has been an explosion of jobs to work with the Department of Homeland Security.” **AG**