

We've got a job for you!

by Kasey Witherspoon, Whitewright, Texas

As the demand increases for agricultural education teachers nationwide, Oklahoma State University programs are "stepping it up" to boost the interest of potential teachers.

"With an agricultural education degree, a person has many options in the field of agriculture," said Eddie Smith, state FFA adviser.

Smith said earning an agricultural education degree opens the doors to a variety of opportunities. He said as the requests for new and expanded agricultural programs continue across the state, more students must be prepared and interested in becoming agricultural teachers.

The nation has a significant demand for agricultural education teachers because of the growth in high school enrollments and the students' interest in agriculture, said James Leising, department head for the OSU Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and 4-H Youth Development.

"It is important that we continue to increase the interest of these young people," said Leising.

The number of students enrolling in Oklahoma's high school agricultural education programs is increasing quickly, having an effect on the demand for certified agricultural education teachers, said Bill Weeks, agricultural education professor. As the programs grow, it is necessary to add additional teaching positions to the public school systems.

Currently, Oklahoma has 356 high school agricultural education programs.

With 432 teachers among those programs, 32 percent of those teachers will be eligible for retirement within the next five years, said Kent Boggs, Oklahoma FFA executive secretary.

OSU is taking important steps toward building more interest in prospective agricultural teachers. The OSU agricultural education program had 41 students in the 2004-05 school year who completed the certification process for agricultural education. More than half of these individuals currently are teaching secondary education in Oklahoma.

Starting salaries for agricultural education teachers currently are more than \$36,000. For those interested in agricultural education teaching positions, that is a positive aspect for their future careers, said Leising.

In 2005-06, OSU has 110 agricultural education students. The number of students also includes those who are working toward a double major with animal science or agricultural economics.

"The double majors allow students who are interested in the field of agricultural education to broaden their horizons," said Leising.

The faculty in agricultural education at OSU work with junior colleges and high schools in the state to identify and recruit students who are planning to major in agricultural education and have the desire to receive their full certification with the teaching option.

"The purpose of working with these individuals is to encourage, nurture and mentor these students," said Leising.

As a part of its recruiting effort, the department conducted a workshop at the 2005 Oklahoma State FFA Convention for students who expressed an interest in agricultural teaching as a future career.

Each of these contributions by the department was completed to encourage and broaden the recruitment of prospective agricultural teachers. Leising said the OSU agricultural education program considers youth education to be an essential component of the department.

OSU provides agricultural education students with a scholarship program, awarding a total of \$35,000 each year.

"The OSU agricultural education program is taking things above and beyond with the scholarship program for prospective teachers, being one of the best in the nation," said Boggs.

Incoming freshmen, transfer students and continuing students may apply for an OSU Agricultural Education Scholarship, which is \$1,000 per semester. The number of scholarships is determined by annual interest income of scholarship trusts. Scholarships are awarded based on leadership, scholastic ability and financial need. Scholarship recipients are selected by the OSU Agricultural Education Scholarship Inc. board of directors.

To be eligible for college and other departmental agricultural education scholarships, students are encouraged to complete the CASNR scholarship application, said Leising. The deadline to apply for 2006-07 scholarships is Feb. 1.

The Oklahoma Agricultural Education Teachers Association awards scholarships to prepared high school seniors. The scholarships are awarded in the spring and fall semesters, after each application is reviewed and ranked by the district vice presidents.

Boggs said the Oklahoma FFA Association will continue to recruit future teachers into the profession as the demand increases.

Recruitment tools such as the workshop "Becoming an Agricultural Education Teacher and FFA Adviser" have been successful in continuing the interest of prospective agricultural teachers, said Boggs.

Feature articles are publicized in various magazines, which highlight the careers of outstanding young teachers who recently have entered the profession, hoping to spark the interest of students, he said.

"We certainly consider agricultural education teachers to be leaders, leaders for the next generation of future agriculturalists, as well as leaders in their local schools and communities," said Boggs. "They are tremendous influencers who make a positive difference in others' lives on a daily basis."

For more information on application deadlines and various agricultural education scholarships offered at OSU, please visit the departmental Web site at <http://aged.okstate.edu> or call the academic programs office at (405) 744-5395.

Bob Mitchell, OSU alumnus, is the agricultural education teacher at Ripley High School. Mitchell enjoys encouraging students with an interest in agriculture like Blake Toews (left) and Austin Miller. (photo by Kasey Witherspoon)

Kevin Howell, an agricultural education sophomore, practices teaching class in AGED 3103. (photo by Marcus Ashlock)