

Going on the Ag Econ Job Market

For many graduate students in ARE, the first foray into the job market occurs at the employment center at the annual meeting of the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). This year the AAEA meetings will be held on July 27-30 in Montreal. If you are planning to attend, you should register for both the conference and the employment center (<http://www.aaea.org/meetings/aaea/2003/employment.cfm>) soon.

Who advertises at the employment center: Agricultural economics departments (almost always from the U.S. and Canada), government agencies, international organizations, and private employers. Some of the positions will be in traditional ag areas, but there will also be several positions in environment and resources, development, and other areas where agricultural and applied economics departments are active. Most years there are several dozen employers.

A word of caution for the 2003-04 job market: agricultural economics departments are in public universities. Their ability to hire is often determined by annual state budgets. Since the economy has been sluggish and tax revenues have been down, many employers who would like to hire may not be able to this year because of hiring freezes imposed by state legislatures. Government agencies may also not hire as much as they would like to this year. This does not mean you should despair, but it may influence how you approach your search this year.

Not all agricultural economics departments that have positions will interview at the summer meetings. Many of them choose to participate in the larger market at the winter meetings. Sometimes this is because they wish to attract a wider variety of applicants, and sometimes it is simply because the position is not approved until after the summer meetings. You can, however, often find out who will be hiring later in the year. Make sure you let the faculty and alumni know you are on the market, so they can steer potential employers your way. Also, some employers – especially government agencies – will conduct interviews at both sets of meetings.

Some government agencies and international organizations will tell you that they are conducting “informational” interviews. Often this means that they are not sure if or how many people they are hiring yet, as the following year’s budget has not yet been approved. They are using the meetings as a way of telling applicants about the opportunities they may have. You should approach informational interviews as seriously as any other interview – if you make a good impression, you will likely be at the top of the recruiter’s list when he or she knows more about that organization’s hiring needs.

Why you should participate: If you already know you want an academic job in an agricultural economics department or to work for USDA, you probably don’t need much convincing. Even if you don’t think of yourself as an aggie, you should keep in mind that the same interests that brought you to ARE may be well matched by the employers at

AAEA. For example, one of the largest groups of resource economists in DC works at ERS, which recruits at AAEA every year. There are also quality of life issues to be considered: ag econ departments often have more research funding and lower teaching loads than their “straight” econ counterparts.

The summer meetings are also a way to dip your toes into the job market. They are much more relaxed than the winter madhouse. Even if your dream job is not waiting for you at the summer meetings, you will find that it is a good way to learn how to present yourself to employers. Moreover, you can never know when a connection you make at these meetings may be useful to you in your job search or further on in your career.

For better or worse, you should be aware of what it means to be finishing a Ph.D. in agricultural economics at Berkeley. ARE has an excellent reputation, and many people would tell you it is the top program in the field. Some employers will want to talk to you simply because you are a Berkeley student, even if you can't tie your shoes. Moreover, our faculty members have personal connections with someone at every single academic department, government agency, or major organization that is interviewing there. You should take advantage of opportunities to “network,” and encourage your advisors (and other ARE faculty and alumni) to introduce you to people. The other side of this coin is that some people may have preconceived notions about you because you're from Berkeley. You should be proud of your degree, but if you make a big deal of your Berkeley pedigree you will surely be perceived as arrogant. In general, however, being from Berkeley is an asset that can serve you quite well at AAEA.

It is interesting to contrast this to the larger economics job market. Some employers there will know our department and will think favorably of it, and others will think positively of you because of the University's reputation. At the same time, some employers will think that agricultural economics is all about crop forecasts and commodity pricing, or may not view you as a “real” economist. To some extent you can counteract such prejudices in your application materials, but there is always a certain segment of jobs that will be very difficult to access because of the nature of our department. To be sure, our students do very well in the winter market, and often take jobs away from candidates from top economics departments. Nonetheless, you should be aware of this dynamic.

A particularly nice feature about jobs advertised at the AAEA meetings is the timing. Several of our students have accepted offers in September or October for jobs starting the following fall. If you can find a job early you will have a much more pleasant final year in graduate school!

How it works: When you register for the AAEA employment center, you will be asked to submit an online CV and fill out a short questionnaire. Employers who register will be able to view your materials online, and you will then be able to view job listings online as they become available. A few weeks before the conference you will be able to start scheduling interviews through the online system. You can initiate the contact, but sometimes employers will email you first requesting an interview. The electronic

scheduling system is fairly flexible, although it can take a few iterations before you find a time that works for both you and the employer.

Unlike the winter ASSA job meetings, you generally will not be asked to submit a formal job application before these interviews. In general, if you request an interview with an employer, they will want to speak with you. If the recruiters for a position in which you are interested do not respond positively, you might want to ask your advisors to contact them on your behalf (more on this below).

Do not be too discouraged if there aren't many job postings in the system a few weeks before the conference. Many employers put up listings just shortly before the meeting starts, and a large percentage of listings first become available at the actual meeting. That said, it is still to your advantage to schedule early for things in which you are interested. Schedules do fill up. Also, try to keep things as manageable as possible. Do not schedule early morning interviews if you are not a morning person (and keep in mind the time change in Montreal). If at all possible, do not schedule interviews back-to-back. Meetings often start late, and you will also want to be able to have the flexibility to talk longer with an employer who is particularly interested in you.

What to do beforehand: As soon as possible, you should put together your CV. This takes a bit more effort than you may expect. The best way to get started is to look at recent CVs from other job market candidates in ARE and other departments. Once you have drafted your CV, give it to several other people for their comments. Both fellow students and professors will have useful input for you. Of course, people have different philosophies about what should or should not be on a CV, and you may receive conflicting advice. The bottom line is that an employer should be able to spend a few minutes looking at your CV and have a good sense of your background and qualifications. If you leave off meaningful things, you will be selling yourself short. If you put on too much (or include too much description), you may make it difficult for employers to find the good stuff.

If you use LaTeX for document preparation, you may wish to use the "arevita" document class to help you prepare your CV. See <http://are.berkeley.edu/mason/computing/help/misc/arevita.html> for more information.

It is not necessary to have your dissertation completed. What employers will want to see is evidence that you will be finishing by the following summer. Still, it will be helpful to have copies of any working papers or published articles to bring to the meetings. Also, be aware that some employers may want to invite you for an on-site visit shortly after the meetings. You should be prepared to give a job talk by the end of the summer.

You will need to be able to explain what your dissertation is about and why it is interesting. Be prepared to give a brief (two or three minute) description of what you are working on. You should rehearse this before you go to the meetings, but it needs to sound fresh and exciting each time you recite it.

If an interviewer is interested in you, they are likely to ask you at the meetings or shortly afterwards for reference letters. Before you go to the meetings you should already have approached the people you would like to have write letters on your behalf and made sure that they are prepared to do so. If you are getting a letter from someone who will not be available during the summer, you may want to ask that he or she draft a letter for you beforehand and leave the file with an administrative assistant.

What to expect at the meetings: The employment center will probably be in a ballroom or several conference rooms. There will be an area where job seekers can search the listings and employers can look through binders filled with the CVs of applicants. It is pretty interesting to take a glance at other job seeker's listings if you have a chance! Hanging on a bulletin board somewhere will be a list of employers with the number of the table where they are conducting interviews. There will also be computer terminals for scheduling interviews and receiving messages. You should check your messages at least once a day, as it is not uncommon for employers to see your materials in the binders and try to contact for a meeting.

When it is time for an interview to start, you will go into the interviewing area and look for the table number of the employer you are meeting with. In most cases, you will go right up and introduce yourself. If no one is at your table, you should just sit down and wait for them. Most likely they stepped out for a coffee or bathroom break and will be back in a few minutes.

Your interview may be with one, two, or even three people. As at the winter meetings, many interviews will start with "tell me about your dissertation." Other employers may begin by spending several minutes telling you about the organization and position. You should be prepared to discuss your research, your attitudes toward and experience with teaching (for academic jobs), your previous work experience, etc. Almost every interview includes an opportunity for you to ask questions; you should be prepared for this. In general, these interviews are not that different from those at the ASSA meetings, and much of the written advice on how to conduct yourself there applies here as well.

As you have certainly already noticed, ag economists are not the most fashion-conscious group. Despite this, you should be well-dressed at the summer meetings (yes, this means a tie and jacket for the guys). Some interviewers will be expecting it. It is far better to be overdressed for a job interview than underdressed. You should maintain a neat appearance even on those days when you have no interviews scheduled. Since the AAEE is a reasonably small group, you may find yourself talking to people who will have jobs available later that year. Save the ripped jeans for your first day on the job.

You should keep in mind that the folks who are conducting the interviews are probably working pretty hard themselves. For example, try not to schedule a meeting with a particularly interesting prospect right before lunch, as they may be burned out from a long morning and more interested in taking their break than in speaking with you. If an

interviewer suggests taking a walk or going for a snack, you should be eager to accommodate them. They have been sitting one place for several hours and are surely in need of a change in scenery. A bored or fidgety interviewer is less likely to realize how great you are.

What else is going on at the meetings: The AAEA meetings are very social. Many academic departments host evening receptions, as do some of the larger non-academic organizations. You should definitely go to the Berkeley reception, as it will be a great opportunity to meet former students. You will find that our alumni take a genuine interest in current students. They also are usually willing to share amusing (and even embarrassing) stories about our faculty.

Attending sessions is a good way to learn more about the field. You will also find it helpful to get to know the people who are active in your specific areas of interest. You should not be shy about asking questions during the sessions, or about talking to people afterwards. Asking someone for more information on their work is one of the best ways to make a favorable first impression!

If you are presenting at the meetings, bring extra copies of your paper. If your session is one of several on a topic, try to attend all of the sessions in that track. Also, make sure to bring copies of your CV to your presentation in case people approach you afterwards.

In general, the more you participate in the conference, the more opportunities you will have to meet people and make favorable impressions. It will also help you feel more excited about your future as a professional. If you are fully engaged in your areas of interest, you will take more satisfaction in what you are doing, and also be more desirable as an employee and colleague.

General Advice: You should seek out the advice and experience of as many people as possible. Some of this advice will be contradictory. Other people can help you much more than you may realize, but at the same time you alone are responsible for your future. Spend some time thinking through your options and setting goals for yourself. Take the process seriously, but at the same time have as much fun as possible.

In addition to the jobs advertised through the employment center each summer, the AAEA maintains a list of job openings year-round. You can access these and other listings of interest to ARE students on the web (http://are.berkeley.edu/courses/envres_seminar/deptpages/job.html). This website also includes a link to John Cawley's excellent article on the academic job market for economists.