

Job Search Advice from Plant Pathology alumni

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I graduated from UW-Madison with a PhD in Plant Pathology and a minor in Plant Breeding & Plant Genetics in 2014. Currently, I work for NewLeaf Symbiotics, a St. Louis-based start-up company that focuses on the development of beneficial plant-associated bacteria for plant health applications. I started at NewLeaf Symbiotics as a Research Scientist in 2014 and have since had the opportunity to build my own pathology research program and move into the position of Manager, Crop Protection. In a given week, I may isolate pathogens, perform disease assays and ratings, speak with a patent agent about upcoming IP decisions, and present to investors as we try to raise our next round of venture capital funding.



1. Where did you look for jobs? My job search was primarily through the APS careers portal and that is where I found my initial position with NewLeaf. As a hiring manager now, I use APS to post positions and find that I receive my best applications through their website. I also looked at the Tri Societies website careers portal, academickeys.com, and other scientific society websites. At the time I took my industry job, I also had a post doc offer which I received from a professor with whom I had worked. A great place to start looking for positions is through your network. Another thing to note is that the APS Early Career Committee held a first-ever career fair at the APS Annual Meeting this year. This could be a great place to look!

Beware of Indeed! Everyone and anyone can and does use Indeed to search and apply for positions. As a result, hiring managers get a lot of applications this way and it can be daunting for them to shift through the fluff to find good candidates. Whenever possible, use the company website or other, more discipline specific sites the job posting may be on to submit your application. Also, when asked how you heard about the job, it is generally better to answer with the organization or society website than Indeed. This makes your search appear more specific and indicates you have a strong interest in the organization/discipline.

2. When did you start looking? I started looking about a year out from graduation to get an idea of the kinds of jobs that were out there and who was hiring. I started applying here and there with the idea that, if I got an interview, it would at least be practice, even if I did not get a job offer. I ended up interviewing for my position with NewLeaf in November 2013 and receiving an offer in December of that year. I had planned to graduate in May 2014 but was able to finish a couple months earlier so that I could start my job. It helps to have this kind of flexibility. That being said, I am very glad that I defended and deposited before I started my job! It would have been a struggle to start a new job while trying to finish up. And I am still working on submitting my last two manuscripts!

3. What experiences did you have in graduate school that helped you succeed in getting a job and while on the job? Everything I learned in Plant Path 558 & 599!!! No, seriously! Although I may not have appreciated it at the time, the hands-on skills that I learned in areas outside my graduate research have been the biggest asset to me as far as having the technical skill set needed to succeed in my career. While all the classes at UW expanded my knowledge and helped me to become a more critical thinker, 558/599 have been the classes with the most direct applications to my current career. The data analysis and experimental design skills I learned through advanced stats classes (STATS 572, AGRON 771/772) also helped to set me apart from other candidates during the hiring process and have been very helpful in starting and advancing my career.

As far as experiences that helped with getting the job, writing and soft skills were huge. Recently, I learned that the main reason I received an interview at NewLeaf was my cover letter. As a PhD student, there was little that set me apart from other, more experienced candidates but my ability to write compellingly gave me a competitive edge. Taking advantage of leadership opportunities while in graduate school (PPGC, Graduate School Research Ethics fellowship, APS committees) helped to round out my application and have worked to my advantage in multiple ways. It has also been very helpful that my dissertation research projects included applied and basic components. Being able to converse with everyone from agronomists and farmers to molecular biologists and bioinformaticists has been essential for my career success.

4. Why did you pick the sector you work in? I was in an interesting place as my husband had obtained his PhD a couple years before me and I got to see first-hand the opportunities offered by industry through his experiences. I appreciated that industry was not tied to funding through grants and that one position could open the doors to many other career avenues. To me, the linear track of assistant → associate → full professor did not seem particularly appealing. I took a bit of an odd track by going the start-up route as opposed to taking a position with a big ag company. This was primarily a result of 1) the job description fit me like a glove, 2) there were not a whole lot of opportunities for fresh grads in big ag, and 3) as a two-career couple, I needed to find a job

in a location that would work for both my husband and me. I always figured I would start with the start-up and then move on to big ag, or back to academia if I decided I did not like industry, but the opportunities opened up to me at NewLeaf have kept me hooked. Personally, I've found that I really enjoy the business/product development side of industry and have been working to move my career more in that direction. In a larger company, I likely would not have had the same exposure to different functional areas and would not have been able to move my career in this direction so quickly.

5. What resources, if any, did you use on campus while you were looking and applying for jobs? I did not really use any campus resources except, of course, professors! I talked to a lot of professors as I was applying and interviewing for positions and they were a huge help! They reviewed my application materials and let me know what to expect in an interview. Once I started the job, they were also a great resource when I came up against things I knew nothing about (which happened a fair amount). Aside from professors, I think I may have used some online UW resources for general information on writing cover letters and CVs.