

GMPRO (They Say...)

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Bob McGovern

on the Plant Medicine Program

Bob McGovern, director of the University of Florida's Plant Medicine Program, discusses the purpose of the five-year-old program and how its graduates are impacting commercial, regulatory and international agriculture.

Q. What was the reason for starting a Plant Medicine Program at the University of Florida?

A. The objective is to train individuals in all aspects of the prevention, diagnosis and management of plant health problems. Our goal is to produce plant health practitioners, plant doctors, who function in the same fashion as veterinarians and human doctors.

Q. How is someone who graduates from the Plant Medicine Program different from someone who graduates with degrees in plant pathology and entomology?

A. Unlike Ph.D. students, Doctor of Plant Medicine (DPM) students are not required to conduct research but must accumulate 90 credits of coursework and 30 hours of internship that encompass all agricultural science disciplines (agronomy, entomology, horticulture, plant pathology, soil science, etc.). Upon successful completion of their course of study and final written and oral exams, students receive a DPM degree. Elective classes and internships allow DPM students to specialize by crop or other professional interest.

Q. The first class of Plant Medicine Program students graduated in 2003. Which type of industries did these graduates go into?

A. Our students, past and present, have diverse interests that encompass most segments of the agriculture industry as well the state and federal agencies that regulate it. Our first seven graduates finished the program in 2003 and are now working as crop consultants, in agricultural production, regulatory agriculture and in international agriculture.

Q. Considering the increased concern for bioterrorism in regard to the nation's food supplies, does the Plant Medicine Program address this issue?

A. Safeguarding our crops from terrorist attack is a common goal shared by our program and all agricultural schools and regulatory personnel in the United States. We recently formed an advisory committee to develop a certificate program in regulatory agriculture to address crop security and related issues. This Certificate in Regulatory Agriculture will be available in the

near future to interested DPM students and other graduate students at the University of Florida. It is noteworthy that this year a DPM student was awarded a prestigious Department of Homeland Security Graduate Fellowship.

Q. There is an increasing concern over the number of new pests entering the United States, with Florida being one of the nation's hot spots of activity. How has the Plant Medicine Program addressed this issue?

A. DPM students interact on a regular basis with scientists at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Plant Industry, which is Florida's plant regulatory agency. This interaction occurs through required internships in plant disease diagnosis and arthropod identification. A number of our students have also conducted elective internships with personnel at DPI and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service/Plant Protection and Quarantine on risk assessment, detection and eradication of exotic species.

Q. Based on the interest shown by students in the Plant Medicine Program and various industries' response to the graduates of this program, do you think that more universities will add a similar program to their curriculum?

A. It is our hope that other universities will begin plant medicine programs, at least on a regional basis. I have had inquiries from two major agricultural schools in the past few months about the feasibility of starting similar programs.

Q. What are the biggest changes that have been made to the program since it was initiated in 1999?

A. The Plant Medicine Program has been fine-tuned over the past five years. Our curriculum has been adjusted, procedures for elective internships developed and a standardized final written examination created. Since our program is still a work in progress, we expect that future adjustments will be made based on feedback from graduates. It is our hope that the number of incoming students will continue to increase and that the discipline of plant medicine will evolve in a similar fashion to animal and human medicine.

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