Early Career Members

A Career in Government: My Experiences Working for the USDA-ARS

The agricultural sector provides highly diverse career opportunities that include private companies, academic institutions, non-government organizations, and government agencies. One possible career path is with the federal government, which is one of the largest employers of scientists and engineers in the U.S. Although employment opportunities with the federal government are generally grouped into one large entity, in reality the federal system consists of numerous government agencies with distinct missions and cultures. I have had the opportunity to work for the USDA-ARS first as an undergraduate biological science aide, then a biological science technician, and now as a research scientist.

USDA-ARS is the in-house research agency for USDA, employing approximately 2,200 full-time scientists and post-doc research associates as well as 4,000 support staff at about 100 locations throughout the nation. Employment opportunities can be found throughout the U.S. as stand-alone research laboratories, research units residing on college campuses, or as large, stand-alone research centers. The type of ARS facility may have a slightly different culture based on the size and the type of research being conducted. I have had the opportunity to work at both a stand-alone research laboratory as well as on a college campus. The former provides a close relationship with local stakeholders as the research laboratory is more visible to them and the surrounding community while the latter provides frequent interaction with faculty members and students. Most ARS locations are near colleges and universities and actively seek student employment especially during the summer. This can become a great way to learn novel research techniques early on in your career. Post-doctoral research associate positions are available to conduct critically needed research and receive highly specialized training. Positions for permanent support scientists are also available to assist in maintaining and conducting research directed by research scientists.

At the time, my career path was unclear, but I knew I wanted to do something that would make a contribution to society. I found the work rewarding, and it made me feel good about doing something that would make a difference. I found that I wanted to pursue my graduate degree. After completing my masters and Ph.D. degrees. Although my time in graduate school was more demanding, I was able to work as a part-time ARS technician while also being a part-time student. ARS supported my graduate coursework as well as student jobs (now called Pathways), which were invaluable as I became a research scientist.

Applying for a Federal Job

As with all career opportunities, preparation is crucial. Applying for a federal job can be slightly more consuming than for other positions, so allow yourself time to meet the required deadlines. Job applications for federal government positions are posted on the website USAJOBS.gov, and applicant submissions are done electronically. All ARS post-doc and permanent positions, as well as student jobs (now called Pathways), can be found on USA Jobs.¹ Vacancy announcements provide information for each job description, location, salary information, and keyword searches by job title or government agencies. Applications can remain open for as few as five working days, so applicants are encouraged to create an account with USAJOBS, submit your application packages early, and follow the application package checklist. Applicants should closely look at the “How to Apply” sections and follow the application package checklist. All ARS job announcements include the point of contact to ensure that any question a candidate has can be answered via email or by phone. For more information on a job vacancy, each ARS location has a website, which details the size of the research units and the number of permanent and temporary positions available.