For those early career members considering a graduate education, earning an advanced degree in agronomy, crop science, or soil science is a commitment, and you may even argue it’s a lifestyle. A graduate degree takes passion, initiative, discipline, and focus. When considering pursuing a higher degree, whether after your undergraduate or completion of a master’s degree, there are many paths a person can choose that will best prepare them for this advanced education. Some students may find it best to go directly into an advanced degree after their bachelor’s, but others may find it best to prepare for an advanced degree by first gaining work experience. I chose the latter, and because of the experiences I gained, I personally was better prepared to take on the challenges of an advanced degree as a stronger, better-rounded scientist.

Perhaps you have always had the desire to earn an advanced degree, but maybe you are unsure of what area of soil science, agronomy, or crop science you want to focus on. After all, you need to make sure you are passionate about what you’re studying if you’re going to make a career out of it. Or maybe you are feeling a little burnt out from schoolwork and writing a thesis (not to mention trying to maintain some semblance of a life). If you decide to gain experience in the workforce before pursuing an advanced degree, you may not find your ideal job, but working in virtually any sector of agriculture will provide many long-term benefits such as an expanded professional network and exposure to diverse sectors of agriculture. I accepted a research technician job, which was by far one of my favorite positions. Every day was something different: I gained staking out plots, clipping biomass, running instruments, spraying crops, monitoring growth, and keeping track of multiple samples and data. I now find that I have a much easier time now that I have experience.

Though I was sad to leave that position, I knew a broader background in agriculture would be beneficial to my long-term career goals. I worked for another three years as a soil scientist where I was exposed to soil survey, soil database management, developing and delivering training, outreach, working with producers, and the myriad of issues and decisions producers face in soil management. Although I very much enjoyed my job and co-workers, the desire to return to school increased, and I was in a position where the time was right to commence my studies.

Benefits of Working before Obtaining a Graduate Degree

Transitioning back to schoolwork, tests, late nights, etc. was difficult, but the advantages of working prior to initiating an advanced degree were numerous. Below I have listed several points that highlight the benefits of working before obtaining a graduate degree. By working, you will:

1. Narrow-in your passion.
   Having diverse work experiences exposes you to multiple areas of soil science, agronomy, and crop research. You gain a deeper perspective on the importance of agricultural research, but also an understanding of the issues producers face and decisions they must make to improve production. Through the experience I gained staking out plots, clipping biomass, running instruments, spraying crops, monitoring growth, and keeping track of multiple samples and data, I was better prepared to take on the challenges of an advanced degree as a stronger, better-rounded scientist.

2. Be more engaged in the classroom.
   Your understanding of agricultural issues and research areas that you can be exposed to while working can result in a greater engagement in the classroom. The research and data I gained while working allowed me to ask deeper questions in class and contribute to discussions with a greater depth of knowledge.

3. Gain practical skills.
   Working in the workforce provides you with practical skills that are essential for success in graduate school. From staking out plots, clipping biomass, running instruments, spraying crops, monitoring growth, and keeping track of multiple samples and data, I was better prepared to take on the challenges of an advanced degree as a stronger, better-rounded scientist.

4. Expand your professional network.
   Working in the workforce provides you with an expanded professional network that can be invaluable for success in graduate school. The relationships I built while working allowed me to gain access to resources and opportunities that I may not have had otherwise.

5. Gain experience in the workforce.
   Working in the workforce provides you with experience that is invaluable for success in graduate school. The experience I gained while working allowed me to take on the challenges of an advanced degree as a stronger, better-rounded scientist.

By working prior to obtaining a graduate degree, you will be better prepared for the challenges of advanced education. The benefits of working prior to obtaining a graduate degree are numerous, and they can be invaluable for success in graduate school.