Long-term career goals for professional women in agriculture\(^1\)

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**ABSTRACT**

Formulation of goals early in a career guides behavior, decisions, and priorities. Although selection of goals limits options, it also lends direction to a career. Women must move toward long-term goals along the same pathways that men have used, but they will probably move down these pathways more slowly than men because they tend to have multiple, rather than single goals. As women pursue career goals, they will hold a series of increasingly responsible positions and must establish professional credentials. Documented evidence of productivity, publication in the reviewed literature, high standards of personal and professional deportment, and "special" personal traits and abilities are all involved in establishment of professional identities. Although women have potential conflicts between career and family responsibilities, careful organization and delegation of some duties and responsibilities will help bring balance between their professional and personal lives. Women bring special strengths such as adaptability, flexibility, and good communication ability to the agronomic workplace and they can use these strong points in building professional credentials.

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What are "long-term career goals"? In my late 20s, I never formulated any definite long-term career goals, but I did have a fairly clear idea of what I wanted to be and what I wanted to be involved in when I was 45. Perhaps we can think of "long-term career goals" as being a grown-up version of the child's statement, "I want to be a fireman, or a nurse, or a policeman when I grow up."

When some of us leave graduate school, we realize that we *are* grown up, and we don't have a clear idea of our career goals. At this point in our careers, we should ask ourselves the question, "What do I want to be, who do I want to be like, what do I want to be doing to earn my living when I'm 45?" Then we can establish some long-term goals. As we get older, we expect these vague notions or concepts to become concrete and specific. We expect to be making choices and commitments that will lead us toward a set of goals. As we make these choices, we hope that the goals will come more clearly into focus as we grow older. Luckily the process of setting up long-term goals may be a bit easier for women because they are trained at puberty to think of the long-term consequences of their behavior. They tend to think in 20-year time segments more easily than men do.

**SETTING PRIORITIES**

When we formulate long-term goals early in our career, it gives us future targets to guide our present behavior, decisions, and priorities. Think of yourself as a guided missile—on your way to *somewhere special*. When you put it that way, you realize that your guidance system needs instructions to keep you on the right track so that you can achieve your goals. You also will appear to others as someone who knows where they are going, with purpose and determination. It will show in your body language. Setting long-term goals also has the advantage that you do not reach old age with regrets. You prevent a lot of directionless meandering and wasted time. One word of warning: set your goals high. If you do, you'll achieve more, even if you don't quite meet your goals. Also by setting high goals you will be willing to put up with delayed gratification, which unfortunately is a normal and necessary factor in any long-term achievement.

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One disadvantage of setting long-term career goals is that, by choosing to achieve one of them, we have chosen to not achieve dozens of others. With every choice, we decrease our options. And yet, it is important to make our goals as specific as possible. It really isn't very helpful to say, "I want to be an agronomist when I am 45." You are already doing that. It's much better to say, "I want to be a full professor at a Land Grant university when I am 45, or "I want to be on the managerial staff in an agricultural chemical company or contract research institute when I am 45." Each one of these goals would require a different set of mid-career choices, of mid-course corrections. By choosing one path, we choose not to go down the others.

**MOTIVATORS**

What are the motivators in this process of setting long-term goals. No doubt all of us work to make money, and the more we make the better we feel about ourselves. Do not downgrade the importance of money in your life. Remember that making money is an important factor in establishing independence and feelings of self-worth. Consider money when you are tempted to become a research associate to either your husband or to another male scientist. Some of your feelings of self-esteem come from making your own money and being responsible for your own career.

But something besides money should guide you in your life choices. Your work has to have some kind of meaning, some relevance, and you have to believe that what you do is important, fun, or useful. So, besides making lots of money you might pursue goals that would give you prestige, personal recognition, or achievement. The motivator, for others, may be the ability to have power over other people, money, programs, or changing the direction of science. Helping other people and being of service are natural motivators for most women because of their tendency to be nurturing. Many women like to help young people succeed and feel a vicarious thrill when those they help do well. Some people want to make a contribution to society, and most of us want a feeling of being unique or special. One or more of these factors drives us toward our goals.

Your life is your show; you are the director, producer, and the principal actor. If you are to be satisfied with the show you must be sure that you plan according to the desires of your own heart. When formulating goals, remember that you alone need to be made happy. And when you have set your goals, do not tell anybody what they are. You do not want your motives and driving principles to be too obvious. Mysterious is useful in keeping other people guessing. And besides, you might want to shift goals along the way. Shifting goals is easier when it doesn’t involve having to explain an apparent failure as a shift of goals.

The world changes as we move through our careers. Opportunities suddenly appear that we didn’t anticipate when we set our goals. Do not hold rigidly to outdated goals. Don’t miss new opportunities as they arise. After you set your goals, be willing to commit your own time and money (unless, of course, you are the sole source of support for a family) to invest in your career until you are in your mid-40s. Remember that delayed gratification is one of the necessary factors in achieving success. Paying for meetings when employer funding wasn’t available is one way that I have supported my own career.

**PATHWAYS FOR SUCCESS**

Once you have set your goals and have committed yourself to reaching them, determine the available pathways for reaching that goal. Women have a real disadvantage in outlining pathways for achievement because there are no female chairs of agronomy and no women who are Deans of Agriculture. There are no female role models. For some time women will have to operate in something of a vacuum, using male role models.

In the present-day system, we do not have special career guidelines for women in agronomy, whereas we do have clear-cut guidelines for marriage, child rearing, and family. The fact that women have available one track that is vague, dark and foggy and another that is clear-cut makes their guidance system shaky! But if women do choose to go down that dark and foggy path, then they must, for the present at least, use those pathways that men have used successfully to achieve these goals. They will have to believe that the system will allow them to succeed by these routes men have used.

Although women will use the same pathways, I do not necessarily think that they will use the same techniques and timing in their travel along those pathways. Women tend to have multiple goals rather than single goals.

What do I mean by "pathway"? You could set a goal, for instance, to have a large well-funded graduate student program. If you look at the careers of men who have achieved this goal, you will find that they did it by a number of steps. They obtained a degree from a good research university; they published aggressively and as often as possible in the open reviewed literature; and they applied for and won research grants. You will also find that for the first 10 years of their career, they worked hard in the laboratory and the field. They probably put in 60 to 80 h weeks. During this time they built concepts and depth of thinking about their field of study and they mined these stores for the next decade. Also you will usually find that these successful men, at some point in their careers, were willing to risk—to move into a new part of the country or to go into a new research area. They were willing to reach out and take risks, which women may find difficult to do.

The above list comprises a pathway—all the prerequisites that are necessary for acquiring the desired status. Notice that all of the steps in this pathway are documentable; the degrees, the positions, the grants,
and so on. I believe that women will have to perform and document these same steps. The pathway toward your goals will involve a series of positions of increasing difficulty and increasing generality.

One aspect of career development that has been generally closed to women is the protégé system. Men are usually reluctant to adopt young women colleagues as their protégés because forces operate to discourage them. One is the expectation that the woman will drop out eventually anyway so that any effort will be lost along with a loss of personal credibility for having supported a loser. Another is the danger of arousing jealousy in a wife. Also men commonly think of women colleagues as good assistants rather than colleagues. I was fortunate to have an older male sponsor. If you do have a sponsor, he can help to place your name before the right people at the right time. One word of warning: be sure that you maintain your independence and that you make your mark in an area of research in addition to the area of your sponsor. Otherwise people may assume that the work results from the sponsor's ability rather than yours. It is easy for a woman to become over-identified with a male sponsor and thus to lose her own identity.

**OBTAINING POSITIONS**

Let's turn to the topics of obtaining positions, changing positions during the course of a career, and, most important, establishing the professional credentials that make it possible to move forward toward career goals.

When I left graduate school I was unaware of what a position really is. A position is a list of duties and a salary that goes with it. For example, the office of President is a position, and Mr. Reagan happens to be the person in that position. The duties of the office are listed in the U.S. Constitution and haven't really changed in two centuries. And yet the day-by-day tasks that our modern Presidents undertake differ markedly from those of Mr. Lincoln, and the style of the office changes with each incumbent. In like manner, you can fill a position by performing the minimum duties listed in the position description, or you can have real impact on the position. Your eventual goal is to outgrow each position that you hold. Looking at a position description from the point of view of your supervisor, you will find that he (or she) is going to want to fill that position with i) someone who is highly qualified and ii) someone who has proved that they will be a productive employee.

Just having a Ph.D. degree is not necessarily a guarantee of top-listing for a position; you want to write your résumé so as to establish that you are an excellent choice for the position and that you are a productive person. Write your résumé so that anybody can understand it in about 2 min. Make it short. Put your best features first. Use strong verbs which imply action—like "developed, evaluated, formulated, initiated, led, or managed." If you are having trouble finding positions to apply for, try *Science*, *Nature*, *Agronomy News*, your departmental bulletin board, and ask your major professors or other colleagues who have recently obtained new positions. Women generally have to rely more on published ads for positions and less on the buddy system than men do. Accept that fact and act accordingly.

Changing positions, an important career booster, can be stressful but stimulating. Do it as often as you can stand it. Stay in any one place at least 2 years and preferably longer so that your record doesn't look too spotty and unstable. When you leave, make them sorry to see you go. Work hard to do a professional job of tying up the loose ends so that they will remember you as a valuable colleague. Use these shifts to broaden your experience, to negotiate a significant salary rise, to take risks, to expand your geographical experience, or to broaden your field of work. When you get into a new position, never downgrade your old boss or institution. Neither should you make constant reference to how things were done in your old institution because you may inadvertently downgrade your present employer. If you have long-term career goals, your present position is not necessarily your career. Changing positions serves to remind you and your boss that you are not captive. Your present position is merely a useful vehicle for reaching your goal. Supervisors don't like you to think this way because they would like to believe that you are captive to their system. Don't let that happen. Always be willing to consider a shift if it serves your purposes. Keep your long-term goals in mind as your guide rather than the position which you presently hold.

**PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS**

To obtain positions (or make advancement in the position that you presently hold), you will have to establish your professional credentials. Obtaining the proper degree is a minimum requirement. You must also provide evidence of productivity. Remember that those hiring you want you to be a success. Their judgment is riding on your success. Therefore, they want evidence of your ability to succeed. Let me illustrate. If you received a Masters degree more than 2 years ago, and you don’t also have a reviewed literature version of that research published, you aren't as aggressive as you should be. If you have a Ph.D. and haven't at least published an abstract or two of that work or presented the work at meetings, you need to rethink your strategy. “Well,” you might say, “my school wouldn't send me to any meetings.” Unfortunately, going to professional meetings is your duty, not your privilege. I pay to go to the annual meetings of the American Society of Plant Physiologists every other year at least, in spite of travel ceilings. I have done so everywhere I’ve worked when attending meetings was necessary or useful.

Establishment of professional credentials is mandatory. First and most important is documented evidence of productivity; second is your personal and
professional deportment; and finally are those special personal characteristics that mark you as "special."

What I mean by "documentable evidence of productivity" are degrees, papers (especially those in the reviewed literature), abstracts of talks, patents, and laboratory manuals. I even have a 15-minute film listed on my curriculum vita. Of course, membership and participation in professional societies is important as well as service on committees in societies and in your home institution. As you get older, you will receive invitations to present seminars and symposia and to write chapters in books. You will also receive grants to support your research. But even while you are in graduate school you may be asked to take over a professor's class to lecture. This event should be documented because it gives evidence of your competence in the professor's eyes. List all of the seminars which you give to your department. Honors such as Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, Alpha Zeta, Gamma Sigma Delta, or Sigma Xi should be listed. But the most important documentation is illustrated by my three rules for advancement. Remember these! Rule 1 is publish. Rule 2 is publish in the reviewed literature. Rule 3 is publish in the reviewed literature as often as possible.

The second area of establishing professional credentials is your personal and professional deportment. You need to be sure that you behave like a professional. What do I mean? Remember that agriculturists tend to be conservative. Learn to be assertive. Most women have trouble with assertiveness, and I was no exception. Learn to respond assertively to challenges by reading books or taking courses in assertiveness training. Learn and use body language to convey your messages.

Ask yourself these questions. Are you reliable? Do you deliver on your promises? Are your reports in on time? All are examples of good professional behavior. Many young scientists are reluctant to admit errors because of their feelings of insecurity. Be honest about your performance. If you were wrong, say so! Just be sure that you refrain from having to admit to errors any more often than necessary. Learn not to overkill a piece of work; you'll wear yourself out. Learn how much is enough.

When you make appointments, keep them. Be on time and be prepared on whatever topic you are to discuss. How many of you make appointments with your colleagues? Most of us do not. We wander in, sit down, and bring up whatever we want to talk about with little formality. How much more business-like is it to say "Joe, I'd like to see you for about a half-hour next week to discuss so-and-so. Would Tuesday morning be ok?" This tactic gives Joe time to think about the topic and to plan his response. It also sets a time limit for the meeting.

When you conduct formal meetings, the same general rules apply. State an agenda and set an approximate time for the meeting to end. Remember Parkinson's Law. "Work expands to fill the time available for its completion." As you pursue your careers, this is probably the most important law to remember.

Another crucial area of professional deportment, getting along with colleagues, is part of your duty. I have worked with people I did not like; I have worked with people I did not respect; but as long as I worked with them I made sure our relationships were in good repair so that I could get my work done.

One colleague is especially important—your boss. You may find that your boss is a "father-figure" and your relationship may reflect how well you got along with your father. Just remember, he (or she) is the boss. Obey your supervisor's orders even if you disagree with him. I openly disagree with my supervisor in private, but I obey his orders. Do not violate the chain of command by asking your boss's supervisor to override a decision. Never criticize your supervisor in open meetings where people outside of your own unit are present. Watch what you put in writing, and do not put in writing anything that reflects poorly on your supervisor or your organization unless you are willing to separate yourself from both. If you do have a lousy boss, try to find his strong points and shore up his ego by dwelling on those. If you have to ventilate your feelings about this awful incompetent donkey, then use a colleague or a close friend. Do not spread the word. It could hurt you in at least two ways: i) it could get back to your boss and, ii) it could get spread around in agronomic circles and reflect poorly on your whole group so that you become less likely to be successful in grants and other competitive areas. In summary, behave in a business-like way in the workplace.

In addition to documentable evidence of productivity and professional deportment, all of us have unique professional characteristics. Our work habits, teamwork, depth and originality of thought, organizational and managerial skills, teaching ability, independence, and sense of humor. All of these personal traits comprise, along with professional credentials, your total offering to the workplace.

WOMEN AND SUCCESS

Most women have a greater range of roles and status than men. Men's roles and status tend to be congruent, to support one another. Men usually perform their professional work to fulfill a family role. Women in the professions tend to have conflicting roles between career and family and thus have multiple goals. A woman may want to be the Dean of Agriculture and a grandmother! How can women integrate and balance their personal and professional goals so that they can "have it all"? I do not think they can. Women in my generation opted for one or the other. My generation never expected to balance a career, a husband, and children. But these expectations are changing. Men have different expectations of wives than they had in the 1950s. Society does not frown nearly so deeply as it once did on mothers who work and allow their children to come home to an empty house after school. Consequently many young women reach for the brass ring in both careers and family life. They become
If women insist on such a difficult balancing task, then I have a few suggestions. First (and here I am assuming a sufficient income) hire two good part-time servants and delegate to them explicitly all of the burdensome tasks possible. Why two? So one is always available in case a child is ill or for some other emergency. Delegate cooking, cleaning, shopping, washing, errand-running, vacuuming and so on. Spend all of your salary on them if necessary. Remember that delayed gratification may be required. Delegate work to your husband and to the children (if they are old enough). Second, compartmentalize your time rigidly. Work a hard 8-h day but don't take work home at night or on weekends. Live as near as possible to work and organize your work schedule to streamline your time. Limit your professional obligations so that you travel at times when the home front is covered. Similarly, limit the number of children you have so as to limit the home problems. For women in agriculture, sending the kids to summer camp during the growing season makes sense. Make your schedule and your deadlines clear-cut. For example, keep a wall calendar with deadlines and teaching schedules clearly written so that members of your household know when you are going to be away or when you will be distracted by work pressures. Do the same at work to show clearly your home schedule.

In your social and community life, select a few enjoyable and satisfying relationships and let the rest go. Do not allow yourself to get overextended. For example, if cub scouts really is fun for you, use that as a shield when you are asked to do work in the Parent-Teacher Association or the Cancer Fund Drive. Limit your outlets and do a good job. You may have to limit your professional life by taking half-time work. This path is highly preferable to dropping out all together because agronomy is changing rapidly and if you are not moving forward with it, you are going to become out of date quickly.

Women have a few special strengths to help them in the agronomic workplace: adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to handle stress because of their training to become good wives and mothers. They have a highly developed intuition and can evaluate colleagues and "psyche out the system" with great agility. They may be better than men at lateral thinking, which is at the root of creativity. Warmth and nurturing abilities are valuable in the formulation of teamwork and in all sorts of people-oriented activities, such as teaching. Women have unusually well-developed abilities to see the long-term, to visualize an entire system, and to relate each part of the system to another part. This long-range overview comes from their upbringing. They are also good at being non-directive leaders, or to put it more bluntly, at being manipulative. That's okay as long as you are aware of it. Finally, one of their strongest traits: they are good communicators, and the modern technological world depends on good communication.

SUMMARY

I hope that these comments have disturbed you enough to think about and manage your career in the long haul. Remember that your long-term career goals will give your missile guidance system clear signals. Setting goals will cause you to move through your career with purpose and determination and will allow you to signal people that you are somebody and that you are headed for success.

I will close with a paraphrase from Jennifer James: success is not a final destination but is the quality of the journey in getting there. Your journey toward your own long-term career goals will be your own success story.

SUGGESTED READING


