

Kara Snyder 0:00

Hello, and welcome to the PodCAST, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing, communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Julie Hewitt. Julie is an alum of the Department of Agriculture and currently serves as the executive director of the Illinois nutrient Research and Education Council. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Julie Hewitt 0:33

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to talk to you today.

Kara Snyder 0:36

It's gonna be fun. Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

Julie Hewitt 0:42

Oh, that's a good one. So I really, you know, like a lot of high school seniors didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do. And I had taken, you know, those kind of career placement tests. And you'll notice there's kind of a theme where I tend to have these great plans and ideas and then learn new things and had a different direction. But anyway, I actually started off at Illinois State as a speech pathology major. And you know, I always think back and people are like, how did you go from speech pathology to ag business. And I think the kind of funny part of that is when I had done some of that career testing, and also looked at, you know, the the careers that had the highest placement, and the highest starting salaries, and speech pathology met that requirement, I didn't really know anything about speech pathology, or what it meant. And so yeah, that's how I ended up at Illinois State, because it was such a great program there. And also, I was going to be a double major in elementary education. And about three semesters into speech pathology, I realized that it didn't matter if I could get a job fairly easily in that field that I did not want to do that for the rest of my life.

Kara Snyder 1:56

I love it. So tell us, how did you end up in rap agriculture building, then, like you said, it sounds like kind of a left turn.

Julie Hewitt 2:04

Absolutely. And, you know, I grew up on a farm, I had been, you know, really involved in four h, my high school didn't have FFA, so I hadn't had that opportunity. But, you know, I had always been really involved on our family farm, particularly in our livestock production. And I had, you know, had my own my own hogs. And I had shown hogs, you know, at county fairs, kind of all over the state. And so I always really enjoyed that. And when I was thinking about, okay, if I'm not going to do speech pathology, and I'm not going to do you know, elementary education, what else do I enjoy. And so I actually had made an appointment to go over and talk to would have been Aaron Moore, at that time at the Department of Ag and

kind of talk about, you know, what the opportunities were, what the degree programs were, how the classes that I had already taken might align with what we had there. And it just really looked like it was going to be a great fit. So I went home over Christmas break, and told my parents that I had changed my major to agriculture. And they were a little surprised, supportive, but a little surprised, because even back then, I mean, now now, so many more people have a great understanding of the career opportunities in agriculture. But back in 1995, I think a lot of people thought, Oh, if you're getting your degree in agriculture, you're gonna go home and farm. And that was never the intention.

Kara Snyder 3:29

And I think there's a little bit of a misconception with that. Now, like you said, it's gotten a lot better. And we have a lot of students that are here from Chicago from the suburbs, that didn't have the start that you had on the farm. So tell us what that was like for you and how you were able to understand the possibilities and what doors this degree was opening in front of you.

Julie Hewitt 3:51

You know, I think a lot of it was doing some of just the things that people were doing. The other thing that helped me a ton, is I actually ended up so I changed my major in between fall and spring semester of my sophomore year. And then I actually that following year, I took the spring semester off and did a six month internship with an Agricultural Chemical Company. And you know, as much as it was a little bit scary to take a semester off school, I really credit that opportunity to help set me on a path and to better understand what the opportunities were that were available in agriculture. And you know, again, we've seen a ton of changes over the last almost 30 years, you know, and one of those has been, you know, all the consolidation that happened. But you know, back in the late 90s, when I was graduating from college, most of the big companies were still around. So there were a ton of opportunities, particularly in the ag chemical world, in the SeaWorld those types of things. But you know, I think really, again, just being able to take all of the different classes, you know, and because I had an ag business degree, I was taking all of the classes so I was taking Soil Science class and an animal science class. And, you know, an ag sales class, doing the accounting, you know, economics, all of those types of things. So it really gave me a really a broad exposure to all of the different types of things that can be done in Ag.

Kara Snyder 5:17

So tell us then what did that initial job search look like? For you? Did you go back to the place you had your internship or did one of these other classes you took spark something for you? Where did you head after you had your degree?

Julie Hewitt 5:31

So I actually through I had the opportunity through college to do several internships. So my original the six month internship was with an ag Chemical Company, I'd had an opportunity the following summer, to do another internship with another ag chemical company. And then while on campus, I actually had an opportunity to do a an internship at GrowMark in

their market analysis group. So I actually a lot of my kind of career path was started with participating in career fairs that were held by the department, you know, I know I used the Student Services area to do mock interviews to help me with my resume. And I actually got my first job out of college was with an ag chemical company, it was not one that I had internships with. But it was one of you know, the major companies at that time, and I actually had my my first interview for that position happened as part of the Career Fair there at the Department of Ag.

Kara Snyder 6:30

Can you talk a little bit about the importance of being able to take those skills that you learned in the classroom and apply them outside of the classroom, because you certainly had a wealth of opportunity to do that before you even left campus. So tell us what that was, like.

Julie Hewitt 6:45

You know, I think it's so it's so tough, especially as you know, an undergrad student, too, to fully understand what you're getting out of your college education, you know, you're learning so much, you know, when sometimes it is like, Oh, I have to learn this so that I can pass this next test, or that I can meet the prereqs for whatever class is coming next. But I think the really nice thing was having an exposure across so many different areas of the industry, one helped me to sort of narrow down where I wanted my focus to be so you know, I, I always laugh, I think back to there was like an ag mechanics class that was required, you know, we all, we all took it. And I knew, after, you know, taking apart and rebuilding a small engine, that my future was not in any sort of mechanics. And that, you know, things like making concrete and doing some of those other really cool skills, that that was not my strong suit. However, I knew that, you know, the things I was learning in far management type work. And then also that just the base knowledge, you know, thankfully, nobody really expects that you're going to come out of college and be the expert. I think a lot of what I took away from my class work was one, building a network of people that I could go to, you know, whether it was my professors, whether it was, you know, people that had been in my sorority, and we're now you know, in the workforce, kind of that back pocket list of resources of folks that you could go to and ask questions. And again, you know, having the opportunity to do the internships really helps, because, again, that was back in 1997 1998. And I still keep in touch with the folks that I worked with, during that time.

Kara Snyder 8:24

And when you talk about building a network, I know some of our students, they hear the word networking, and it's almost like I can see their shoulders tense up, right? Like that can be kind of an intimidating term and an intimidating concept for some people. So can you tell us a little bit about how you were able to build those relationships and kind of naturally grow your network without it being intimidating?

Julie Hewitt 8:50

That is such a good point. Because I you know, I think I see that even in professional circles, because for me, at least building my network really has been pretty organic. You know, there's been times where you're like, Okay, I've met this person, and I know this person is somebody that I need to get them in my network. But for the most part, it's, you know, folks that you've come across just in the course of, you know, whether it's your, your college days, or your early career, that you're able to look at and go, okay, this person seems to have figured out at least this part of their life or their career, and I get along with them, I trust them and taking the opportunity. And I think this is one of the things that I always try to tell young people as well is that the more we can listen, the more we take away from that. And I think a lot of my networking has just been in, you know, identifying the people that I enjoy listening to talk about, you know, again, their careers, what just what they're doing, you know, you'll identify people that are phenomenal public speakers, and so you know, when it's not always even just like, Alright, I'm going to sit down and grill them and find out how to be Come a great public speaker, but it's sitting back and watching and thinking about, Okay, I'm pretty sure this person has put this together, they put some thought to it, they didn't just show up this morning and say, I'm going to give a 30 minute presentation on whatever this is. And you want to get so much can be learned by just sort of sitting back for a minute and observing.

Kara Snyder 10:20

I love that you hit on the importance of listening, because I think so often we think of networking as this action oriented activity, and listening, you know, we need to be active listeners, but it can take some of the pressure off of that, you know, if we're asking people about themselves, and what we have to do is listen and information gather, the experience becomes less intimidating and more about learning. So thank you for sharing that. I think that's so important.

Julie Hewitt 10:48

Well, it, you know, I think the other thing too, is sometimes when we, when we think about networking, we do get really narrow, and we think about, you know, a specific networking event. And don't get me wrong, I love those, I think it's fantastic. Sometimes it feels a little bit like you know, the old school speed dating where you're like trying to meet as many people as you can and figure out how you click. But for me, the value of that network has really been long term, and not anything that's necessarily forced. But that's it's been really fun. Now to sort of be on the other end of that, I had a group of mentors that, and they've evolved over time as well. But I've, you know, always kind of had that group of mentors. And now that I'm no longer the young one in the career, it's kind of nice to see where I'm now starting to see myself being on that, the other end of that, and it's always great to know that I now have been, you know, kind of made it to somebody's, with two people that they want to network with, and hopefully can help them with, you know, whatever it is they're trying to figure out?

Kara Snyder 11:50

Well, and I'm sure you have lots to teach someone because I'm so curious to find out how you went from your first job at a chemical company to now you have the title of executive director of the Illinois nutrient Research and Education Council. What did that path look like for you?

Julie Hewitt 12:08

It's a little bit of a long and winding path. My my dad, who actually both my parents are Illinois State alumni as well, one in math and one in education. But anyway, my you know, my dad is my dad has always been one of my my biggest mentors. And he laughed, especially for a while when I was changing jobs fairly frequently. And he would say, I don't know if I should be proud of you. Or if I should tell you to pick a job and stick with it. But you know, now that I'm sort of again, on that other end, I can look back and see how all of the career moves that I've made have really led me to this point and to this opportunity. So again, as I said a little bit ago, when I was first coming out of school in the late 90s. And early 2000s is really when we had started to see a lot of consolidation in both the Ag chemical and the seed industry. So you know, we used to have a lot of these large national companies. And now we're down to just you know, a couple in both of those areas. And some of them are the same companies on both. So yeah, my first job out of school, I was with actually a company called American Cyanamid that is no longer around. They've been several consolidation since then. And while I was with that company, they were purchased. The job that I had at that time was in Des Moines. It was then the only really open place they had for me was in South Dakota. And not that I have anything against South Dakota, but I really kind of wanted to stick in the Midwest. So at that time, I came back to Illinois. And this is the only one that kind of gets a little off track. I actually worked for a radio station. It was primarily a an Ag News Station out of Decatur. It was a great experience. I definitely met a ton of people there. But I was selling radio advertising, which was not my favorite job. But again, I got to meet a lot of people and it kind of filled the gap until I could find something that fit. From there. I actually moved into the seed industry, I worked for Golden Harvest as a corn product in their corn Product Management Group. In that role, I was primarily responsible for managing our hybrid testing program across Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky, and then also managing our what's called our plant characteristics. So really keeping track of the hybrids that we were looking at advancing and tracking them through the growing year to see if they fit in our portfolio. Again, back to the consolidation side. Syngenta actually purchased Golden Harvest. And my job was going to be moving to Nebraska. And again, kind of wanted to stay in Illinois and had an opportunity to go to work for the Illinois Soybean Association as their communications manager. So that was really my first sort of introduction to the world of you know, pharma membership organizations and kind of that not for profit world. I've loved that. job I loved working with the farmer leaders. I did a lot of media outreach in that position. And then I actually took my first two roles working for advertising or marketing agencies. I actually went to an agency in Decatur, that at that time was the agency of record for ADM, because ADM had requested, they bring somebody on who had a production agriculture background that could help them on their farmer facing businesses. So kind of that time around with ADM, I was working on their rain feed and fuel divisions. And so really kind of, again, working on that farmer facing group

love that position, but then had an opportunity to get back into the field. And I went to work for Pioneer as an account manager. So back in the world of seed and back in sales, again, we, you know, really enjoyed that job, and then had an opportunity. Actually, ADM was looking to hire a new agency. And some of the folks that I had worked with years before that had mentioned my name to the agency that was trying to get the business. And they reached out to me and asked me if I would have an interest in coming in. And I actually then got to work on a different side of the ATM business. And that was on the high margin food ingredients. So it really gave me you know, a different a different level of exposure, and I got to learn about some different things. And so, you know, you kind of take all of those things. So I had an opportunity to do research, I had an opportunity to do marketing communications, I had worked for Board of Directors, I had been developed strategic planning, I had done, you know, some of the stuff in a finance division. And I actually my, the boss that I had had, at the radio station is now a recruiter specifically for ag leadership folks. And he had called me and said, Hey, I don't know if you're looking, but I have a job that has come across my desk that I think would be perfect for you. And I had actually just gotten back to work from an extended maternity leave. And you know, at that point said, you know, they've been fantastic to me through my leave, I don't, I just don't think I could do that. And then, about two months later, the position was still open, they had been interviewing, and just hadn't found the right fit. And he called and he said, I think you really need to go, at least interview for this job. And as soon as I went and had the first interview, I realized, okay, everything that I've done to this point has led me to being you know, in this position with the Illinois nutrient Research and Education Council.

Kara Snyder 17:31

That's so exciting. And I love hearing, like you said about all of those pieces and parts come together. And it sounds like you really have found the perfect fit. What is your favorite part of your job?

Julie Hewitt 17:43

You know, I, I really, I love everything about the job. But one of my favorite things is that it's really an opportunity for me to bring all of those skills that I have learned, you know, whether it was through through school, whether it was through jobs, because I have touched so many different parts of our industry, this really is a job that allows me to use all of those skills, and to develop new ones, of course, but you know, to be able to even connect through a lot of what we do, of course, is you know, being being sustainable, protecting water, protecting the efficiency and the economics of producing a crop here in Illinois. And then, you know, I also have to be able to connect that with the consumer side, and talk about, you know, sustainability in our food supply. And because of the work I had done with ADM, I have some of those connections, you know, I understand the ingredient side of it, and have been able to sort of connect that through, again, through the work that we do.

Kara Snyder 18:40

So on the flip side, I have to ask, then what is the most challenging part of your job.

Julie Hewitt 18:45

So, I mean, a lot of it is trying to get our farming community to make change, there's a lot of there's a lot of psychology that's involved in it, you know, we can do our best to understand the science to understand the production side, but then to actually get folks to understand the issues that are out there and to understand the role that they play, and then to make changes on their own farm in order to address those concerns.

Kara Snyder 19:13

That makes perfect sense to me. Tell me, how would you describe your leadership style?

Julie Hewitt 19:19

You know, I think it really goes back to sort of that that mentor, type and building network, I just really have always valued those relationships, in a lot of the work that I've done kind of the professional development and the self growth, you know, that is really my personality style is very much that sort of outgoing bringing everybody together. I very much would say that I'm a consensus builder. And, you know, try to always find the ways that we can all work together. And one of the things that's that's very unique about the board that I work for, is that the board is made up of farmers of ag retailers. have agency folks. So Illinois Department of Ag and the Illinois EPA. And then we also have two environmental groups that serve on our council in an advisory role. And so kind of, again, back to that consensus building, finding ways to make sure that each side feels like they're being heard. And to really take away some of that adversarial relationship between the environmental groups and the agricultural groups, and really realize that for most of the issues we talked about, we're all on the same team. And the more transparency that we have, and the more open dialogue we have, the more we understand the concerns on both sides, I can start to identify some ways that we can move forward.

Kara Snyder 20:41

And what I love about our conversation, Julie is that I hear a common theme throughout is that you started by talking about the importance of listening in order to build your network and create those connections. And now and in your current role, you're talking about the importance of making sure everyone feels heard. And that theme appears throughout your career journey. And I just think that's really special and something that you've been able to acknowledge and continue to do along the way.

Julie Hewitt 21:09

Like I said, I've been so blessed to have some just phenomenal people that I have worked, you know, either alongside or worked for. And, you know, I figured, and I again, I always try to tell, particularly to young folks that every interaction that we have, obviously in a personal sense, but primarily in a professional sense, there's always something that can be taken away. And if you're paying attention, and you're listening, and you're sort of sitting back and observing, because I think sometimes we're so tempted to sort of force our leadership and be like, Look at me, I'm a leader, look at all the things I know and all the

things I do. And you know, my experience has been that the best way to show your leadership is to demonstrate it and almost demonstrate it quietly, to where people just know, hey, if we need something, Julie can either get us the answer, or she knows somebody who can get us that answer. But again, you know, taking advantage that and there have been folks that I have worked with or worked around that I maybe didn't necessarily take, you know, a list of these are the things I want to incorporate when I'm a boss. You know, some of the people that we interact with, we take away lessons of oh my gosh, okay, I will never manage that. Hey, that's still valuable. And you know, I think we all kind of just like, keep that in the back of our minds.

Kara Snyder 22:23

That's great perspective. Thank you for sharing.

Well, we are going to finish with a speed round. So just go with your first instinct on these questions.

Julie Hewitt 22:38

Okay.

Kara Snyder 22:39

Salty or sweet.

Julie Hewitt 22:40

Salty.

Kara Snyder 22:41

What's your favorite day of the week?

Julie Hewitt 22:44

Oddly, it's Thursday.

Kara Snyder 22:46

Oh, do you have a reason? I'm curious.

Julie Hewitt 22:48

I don't know. I think it's because like, it's towards the end of the week. Friday comes with a lot of pressure because you have to like wrap everything up and finish everything up. But like Thursday is like we're easing in. We got one more day to tie a bow on everything. But I like Thursdays.

Kara Snyder 23:05

I love that I've never gotten that answer before. So tell me what are you reading or listening to right now? Anything you'd recommend?

Julie Hewitt 23:13

Yeah, I listen to podcasts all the time. And I listen to them all on either one and a half or 2x speed because my brain needs to keep itself going. But my my current favorite one is wiser than me. It's Julia Louie Dreyfus, who a lot of people remember as Elaine from Seinfeld, it is fantastic. Primarily she interviews successful, you know, women who are older than her and talks about what they wish they had known at her age, and how they kind of navigated going through you know, their professional careers, their relationships, all of those types of things and kind of that listening you know, again, wiser than me, the other one I love is armchair anonymous, armchair expert with Dax Shepard, I love that but I seldom have you know, two hours to listen but he has a shorter kind of segment that's called armchair anonymous where they talk to folks on weird specific topics but it's that's one of them. That's good when I'm like I just need something to fill my brain but I don't have to think real hard.

Kara Snyder 24:14

Well, we'll have to add both of those to our listing less but I'm keying in on the fact that you listen to these at two times speed which leads me to my next question. How do you relax?

Julie Hewitt 24:26

That's a good one. That's no i i enjoy creative outlets so that's really you know, how I how I relaxed I have a lot of hobbies and crafts things that I do you know this now that we're in this time of year, my my youngest daughter and I have what started off as a fairy garden but it is now what we call our gnome home. So we've spent a lot of time in the summer just maintaining that and adding fun things to our Nome home. Yeah, otherwise, traveling you know I do. I do like to get away and the sea parts of the world Hold and get away. Because a lot of times if I'm, if I'm home or somewhere where I can be working, it's a little bit harder to relax.

Kara Snyder 25:06

What's the best trip you've ever taken?

Julie Hewitt 25:09

I would say the Big Island on Hawaii that that definitely is at the top. And I have to say, I know this is supposed to be lightning. But the again, this kind of ties back down to, if you pay attention, and you listen and you're willing to talk to people, it's amazing what some opportunities are that can come up. So I was actually in Hawaii at the Volcano National Park. And we were there before that park, it actually opened. And there was a National Geographic crew there. I started talking to one of the videographers. And he actually gave me a vest. And I got to go out onto the volcano where they were filming and it was currently it wasn't a huge eruption, but it was currently actively flowing. So being on an actively flowing volcano, definitely tops the list.

Kara Snyder 25:54

Oh my gosh, I can't imagine that is so cool.

Julie Hewitt 25:57

Yeah, it was it was and again, you know, sometimes you don't always get your way. But it's amazing what you can do by just talking to the right people?

Kara Snyder 26:07

Absolutely. Well, I asked everybody who comes on the podcast of volunteers, gondola or pub to cheese balls.

Julie Hewitt 26:14

Oh, definitely cheese balls.

Kara Snyder 26:16

And one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Julie Hewitt 26:23

This really goes back to Everything we've talked about, I think the the biggest advice that I would give is to one take advantage of internships. Because those those opportunities are really what helped you to build that network. You know, don't overthink the building the network, but just meet as many people as you can. Even you know, on the back, if you meet folks on the back of their business card when they give it to you or however you're keeping track of contacts, make a little note of not necessarily something about their job, but what it was that stuck with you out of that conversation. And it may be completely unrelated to the job or whatever they're doing. But keep that in mind. And then that gives you you can pull back to that if you happen to run into them again. But yeah, keep keep those networks and take advantage of internships.

Kara Snyder 27:08

Love that. Well. Thank you for that advice. And thanks again for being here. That was Julie Hewitt, the executive director of the Illinois nutrient Research and Education Council. Join us next time on the PodCAST for more stories from our cast alumni.