

My 2023 interview with a UGA grad student. This is an assignment of a UGA Department of Food Science and Technology course for which each student interviews a faculty member in the department.

1. Faculty Background:

a. Could you tell me about your educational background, including the schools you attended and your academic journey?

I got my BS in biotechnology from Shanghai Jiao Tong University. After college, I studied molecular biology at the University of Vienna (Austria) before I transferred to the Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago) where I got my PhD in microbiology. After PhD, I worked briefly at Kraft Foods. I then received an American Society for Microbiology Postdoctoral Fellowship to work at the CDC (Atlanta). After a year and a half into my fellowship, I moved to the UGA Center for Food Safety in December 2013.

b. What work experiences have you had in the field of food science and technology before joining the faculty?

I don't have a formal education in food science and technology. I worked in the industry as an R&D food microbiologist and then in the government as a postdoc to study genomic epidemiology of foodborne pathogens.

2. Research Interests:

a. What are your current research interests within the field of food science and technology?

Food safety and microbiology. Current focuses include 1) genomic epidemiology of foodborne pathogens, and 2) food and agricultural microbiome and metagenomics.

b. Could you share some recent or ongoing research projects you are involved in?

See these: <https://www.denglab.site/publications>,
<https://www.denglab.site/press>

3. What Makes You Successful:

a. In your opinion, what qualities or factors have contributed to your success as a researcher and faculty member?

Be able to identify and learn good qualities from other researchers. Stay on the cutting edge. Knowledge and skills in molecular and evolutionary biology as a food microbiologist. Be able to code.

b. Are there any specific strategies or habits that have helped you excel in your career?

Attention to detail and emphasis on quality over quantity.

4. Experience with Students from Different Countries:

a. How has your experience been working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

A lot. Current lab members come from China, the US, India, Turkey, and Iran.

b. Can you share an example of a particularly rewarding experience or a challenge you faced while working with international students?

Every international student presents some unique challenges and rewarding experiences. My first student at UGA (a Chinese) came with 0 experience in coding. He is now a software engineer at Amazon in the Silicon Valley. He might well be the first and the only PhD in food science and technology who ended up on this path. He learned coding by himself under my guidance. Look up his publications (Shaokang Zhang) at <https://www.denglab.site/publications>.

5. Hobbies:

a. Outside of your academic and research work, do you have any hobbies or interests that you are passionate about?

Soccer, running, and outdoor activities.

b. How do you balance your academic commitments with your personal interests?

Competitive science (i.e., the pursuit of publications and grants) can be tough. Personal interests provide me with the necessary distraction.

6. Advice for New Students:

a. What advice would you give to new students like me who are starting their journey in food science and technology?

Food safety is remarkably diverse (e.g., diverse career paths in academia, industry, and governments) and interdisciplinary (e.g., our work in bioinformatics, genomics, and data science). Be open-minded and find your niche.

For those who are interested in an academic career: Doing what we do as faculty, it's not that hard to degenerate into a jerk – you don't really have a boss and you spend a big chunk of your time bossing around young people. Don't be a jerk. Be a part of the positive force.

b. Are there any specific resources or opportunities that you would recommend students take advantage of during their time in the department?

Center for Food Safety and the extended food safety community at UGA, which is the largest cohort of the kind among US universities.