John J. Kornacki on The Need For Professional Renewal

Challenges For Policy Educators

Events like the Farm Aid concert and movies such as Country have heightened urban consciousness about the problems of the farmer. The Iowa caucuses, only a harvest away, have moved national politicians to don their overalls and pontificate about the price of corn and other agricultural matters. What is most interesting about all this commotion is not so much what is said—most of us are as confused as ever about agricultural problems—but who is talking.

To no one’s surprise, farmers and agribusinessmen still stalk the halls of Congress, but they are now joined by other groups such as environmentalists, nutritionists, investment bankers, geneticists, and an occasional Hollywood celebrity. Some years ago, Don Paarlberg described the dawning of a new agenda for food and agricultural policy. These new groups are evidence that the new agenda has risen. But despite new groups, new players, and new messages, many agricultural policies have not changed much. It is important to review and revise these policies, then the public needs more than media events, political rhetoric, or gunfights between special interests.

More Complexity and Confusion

Perhaps the most obvious reason for the arrival of more actors in the agricultural policy arena is the widening field of action. Contemporary food and agricultural issues reflect greater complexities and interdependencies than were recognized in earlier times. Contamination of groundwater by agricultural chemicals, for example, is a concern not only for farmers but for entire communities. It involves questions concerning epidemiology, hydrology, geology, legal liability, political jurisdiction, and agricultural practice.

Increased complexity and interdependence of issues is having a profound effect on the job of the public policy educator, who by training is often an agricultural economist. Traditionally public policy education has been an extension program that utilizes knowledge available at the land grant university to educate citizens about public issues so that they can make informed policy. The need for public policy education in food and agriculture, as well as other matters, is probably greater today than at any time in the past.

In today’s policy environment, the skills and competencies necessary to maintain credibility and authority on issues in food and agriculture have become more demanding. Keeping up with a single discipline, or what is more likely a sub-discipline still matters, but a single disciplinary perspective is often inadequate for analyzing policy problems. When these problems must be translated into understandable and workable policy options, the challenge is even greater.

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Complexity Requires Lateral Networks

Professional networks within a single discipline already play an important role in career development and disciplinary practice. With more complex issues to tackle, interprofessional networks are also becoming an essential element to organizational development and problem-focused analysis. A broad concern like rural development benefits from the theoretical vantage points of several disciplines including sociology, anthropology, political science, and geography, as well as economics. Practitioners from public health administrators to transportation engineers contribute to the understanding of the rural environment. Attention given to cultivating these lateral, interprofessional networks will provide the policy educator with increased analytical reach and a firmer grasp of the issue at hand.

Developing networks or increasing

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skills are not without professional or personal cost. Renewal takes time away from specialization and spouse. Burnout is an all too familiar affliction—particularly among young professionals. The policy educator—like many others—must carefully balance commitments and priorities.

Institutions can do their part in supporting the renewal process. There is no better start than the judicious application of a little release time. The short-term sabbatic, the limited fellowship, the organizational swap, or the periodic retreat, are all viable techniques that provide the needed time for intellectual stretching without overburdening the individual.

We may still be satisfied with the lingering remnants of agricultural policies written 50 years ago and now costing $26 billion. Or we may be ready for a new agenda characterized by concert slogans, vague promises, and special interest conflict. Feelings of the public for intellectual stretching without overburdening the individual.

It stands still while farm economy recovers

The farm sector is finally recovering from the prolonged recession of the early 1980’s. This is welcome news to those with a stake in rural America. There will be increased economic activity in the larger rural communities and in some smaller rural communities linked to metro areas; consequently, this means higher incomes and some new jobs for farmers and nonfarmers.

There are also likely to be individual cases where processing of agricultural commodities can be successfully developed in smaller communities, particularly where unique market niches for specialty products are identified and exploited. However, the upturn in the agricultural economy does not portend significant growth in overall rural employment.

Rural employment in farming and agribusiness companies has declined over the past three decades. Although farming and agribusiness are still important employers in every farm production region, prospects for significant increases in farm and agribusiness jobs are dim even with the recovery apparently underway.

Substantial increases in farm and agribusiness jobs are not expected because:

—The growth in domestic markets for farm commodities will be slow.

—New, labor-saving farm technologies will lead to higher yields and larger farm output.

—Rates of farm exports will not likely equal those of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

Farm Employment Continues Down

A lot less work is required to produce a lot more on farms today than was required at the end of World War II. In 1950, nearly 10 million workers (including both family and hired workers) worked on U.S. farms. By 1984, this number had dropped to 3.1 million. Family workers on farms were down from 7.6 million to 2.0 million and hired workers had declined from 2.3 million to 1.0 million.

There is nothing on the horizon indicating a turnaround of these farm employment trends. Currently available labor-saving technology will be adopted by more and more farmers and will lead to further drops in farm numbers and employment.

Over a longer period, the infusion of emerging biological, informational, and mechanical technologies may accelerate the decline in farm numbers. The U.S. Office of Technology Assessment projects significantly higher adoption rates of these technologies by the largest farms compared with smaller farms. These adoption rates would lead to further deterioration in the competitive position of smaller farms, hasten their decline, and reduce the number of operators and family members employed on farms. These declines will be particularly evident in areas with few nonfarm job opportunities for members of small farm households.

One Bright Spot

Agricultural production has always had strong downstream links (food transportation, processing, marketing) and upstream links (farm input suppliers) to local, regional, and national markets. While nearly two-thirds of the jobs in the farm sector are located in rural areas, three-quarters of the jobs in farm-related agribusinesses are concentrated in metro areas. Even so, agribusiness employment is important to rural areas. In fact, more people work in rural agribusiness jobs than work on farms.

The food and fiber system is an important source of rural jobs in every farm production region. This is particularly the case in the rural economies of the Northern Plains. But even there, the farm sector and agriculture-related industries account for less than 40 percent of employment. This percentage is as low as 24 percent in New England.

Of the three categories of agribusi-