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# Lessons Learned in Over 31 Years in Agricultural Economics

Steven C. Turner

Thank you. I appreciate those that nominated me and the committee who evaluated and selected me for this award. I understand the public service commitment of serving on committees and especially those that are entirely voluntary. I am thankful for the Southern Agricultural Economics Association, which was initiated back in 1968, by a group of committed agricultural economists to which all of us owe a debt of gratitude. A thank you is extended to my two employers over my career, The University of Georgia and Mississippi State University. As you know, in the South we attach a great deal of importance to place and I have been lucky to have been given multiple opportunities at both of these institutions. I want to thank my family. My wife of 22 years, Jenny, and our two children, Emily and Clay, empower me to work hard and enjoy life expecting the best and being prepared for the worst. My mother and father, Arthur and Charlotte Turner, made me and as Randy Pausch so eloquently stated, “I hit the parent jackpot” (Pausch and Zaslow, 2008). I also want to thank my students, fellow faculty, and bosses who taught me how to be a student, teacher and researcher, and administrator. It is on these lessons learned which I want to concentrate in the next few minutes.

The framework of this talk, although not directly related to the discipline of agricultural and applied economics, is heavily influenced by the theories and methods of applied economics.

This was especially true when I became an administrator. So what have I learned over the last 31 years in agricultural economics: seven as a student, 17 as a faculty member, and seven as an administrator?

## Student Lessons

Being a student is hard work. Let’s not fool ourselves. I think one of the greatest fallacies we currently endure is that you can learn without reading, writing, and, indirectly, thinking. I understand that many skills are mastered through repetitive application but intellectual progress is very difficult and enormously costly without the efficiency of the written word. Literacy, in my opinion, is the single most important determinant of human and economic development. And after basic literacy, economic literacy is probably most crucial to personal and social progress. So how did an English literature major, who never had an economics (and only one mathematics) course as an undergraduate and had aspirations of a legal career, become an agricultural economist?

Two things attracted me to applied economics: the logic and explanatory power of the theory and the satisfaction derived from the completeness of the methods used to analyze specific problems. I now realize that these components attract a narrow but sufficient quantity of students to further and enhance the future of our profession. In 1995, I was invited to write a paper on “Remembering the Role of Research in Developing a University Student” that was published in the *Review of Agricultural Economics*. Summarizing, I suggested that not only should university students value

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the research attitude, process, and product, but these were a distinguishing characteristic and graduating economically literate students was the primary goal of agricultural economics departments. So what is on the top ten list of lessons learned as a student?

10. Failure is part of success. If you have never have failed, you probably not stretched yourself enough.
9. Ambition is good and necessary to progress.
8. Preparation is a necessary, but not sufficient, ingredient to success.
7. Find good teachers and take every course they offer.
6. Good teachers are not easy.
5. Find a discipline that "floats your boat."
4. Read the material assigned.
3. Study continuously and in spurts.
2. Shine when your time comes (show time).
1. Do not let failure (or success) define you.

The above list should be taken in appreciation that one test or course will not determine your life. The great thing about academia is you get second chances. But do not push your luck. Often the second chance occurs after you have corrected some deficiencies or changed some debilitating behavior. But great discoveries have been and will be made by students who few people believed would amount to much. This fact is a testament to personal initiative and the grace and mercy of God and faculty.

### **Faculty Lessons**

I have been extremely fortunate to be able to have been a faculty member at a major research institution. Both of the universities I have served are land grant institutions and this has been quite influential on my perspective. First, I believe being a faculty member at a public university is a privilege and one that we are not to take lightly. That said, I also believe that these faculty provide positive externalities above and beyond the direct contributions to education, research, and service. So what are our responsibilities as faculty?

We must understand that we have a duty to inquire, analyze, and record our findings as we investigate the mysteries of the world. The passion we have for investigation is the underlying

reason for any success we encounter over our careers. We also need to understand that although we do not have all the answers, we are committed to being responsible for coming up with some alternative solutions. A distinguishing characteristic of many agricultural economists is to not become an advocate for any particular alternative. Many of us believe our role is to present alternatives and analyze the benefits and costs of each alternative. I fit into this category. This is sometimes seen as a bland choice in a world where advocacy is the name of the game and leads to fame (or infamy) and a host of followers ready to bid their leader's marching orders. Nevertheless, as professional economists, we take issue with those who advocate positions with tenuous assumptions and logic undergirding their pronouncements.

We all know that teaching students is a difficult task made even more difficult when abstract theories and mathematics collide. Over the past seven years, I have been teaching the introductory microeconomics course and I have discovered that for many of my students who are freshman and sophomores, the abstract nature of economics is a difficult barrier. I always remember my first econometrics professor, Dr. Carter Hill, telling our Mathematical Economics class that he had been doing this for ten years, five as a student and five as a teacher, so he knew the material like the back of his hand. He understood it was new and confusing for us and he was patient but demanding. I am now that professor who must evaluate each student based on their performance. So one of the first lessons is to learn from your predecessors. Take the best tools, strategies, and techniques from the teachers and professors you have experienced. This applies to teaching, research, and service. Again, you must develop your own niche, style, and approach that differentiate you from your colleagues.

Another lesson concerns your fellow faculty, who are your peers and, in many ways, your evaluators. Respect is the most important quality that must exist among a dynamic and productive faculty. Liking each other is a plus but not necessary to being productive. When a faculty loses respect for each other, the consequences are debilitating and fractious. Once

this has occurred, it is very difficult to correct. Find people you can complement and be better working with them than working alone. Explore new ideas and techniques from other disciplines. One of the problems we constantly encounter is maintaining standards in the face of increasing demands. As a senior faculty member, we have a responsibility to our junior faculty to be as honest as possible about expectations. It is sometimes hard to explain to a new assistant professor that the standard has increased over time and that their evaluation is based on today's standard, not the standard used when you were promoted.

So what is on the top ten list of lessons learned as a faculty member?

10. A career works much like compound interest. The more heavily you invest (work) early, the more wealth (success) you will have later on.
9. Never forget that you were (are) a student first.
8. Be persistent. Perseverance will usually trump intelligence.
7. Be careful and caring in your relationships.
6. Be enthusiastic about your work (especially in the classroom).
5. Learn about your administrators (department head, graduate and undergraduate coordinators, deans and associate deans, etc.).
4. Be organized.
3. Be nice to your fellow faculty and staff (manners are important).
2. Be persistent.
1. Enjoy your work and life as a faculty member.

The list above is not formed in order of importance and probably does not include several important lessons but it covers most of my perceptions over the last 25 years as a faculty member.

### **Administrative Lessons**

I have been a department head for 7 years. During that time, the faculty turnover in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Mississippi State has been rapid. Only three faculty remain from when I was hired in 2003, which means 13 faculty have been hired (9) or transferred (4) into the department since then.

This fact has shaped many of my views concerning administrative effectiveness, as have changes in presidents, vice presidents, and deans. But those are circumstances and each person must deal with a different set of situations. What do you learn by being the administrator, manager, or responsible person? First, you must know yourself and be comfortable with who you are. This takes into account your strengths, but especially your weaknesses. You must remember you were chosen because of your strengths not your weaknesses. Thus, you should always tack to your strengths. That said, weaknesses should not be ignored. I have found that getting assistance from others to shore up weaknesses is one viable alternative. And securing resources to administer the organization is crucial to any success. This is where personal skills come into play and are crucial to success.

Listening, writing, reading and interpreting, and salesmanship are necessary conditions, but not sufficient conditions for a successful career in administration. Patience is also necessary, as is the ability to make a decision without full information. I have also found that consistent and repetitive communication with internal and external clientele is a positive barometer. Another important ingredient is vision. That is, where does the organization want to go and how will it get there? Vision often gets superseded by all the necessary responsibilities of management.

What are ten things to remember as an administrator?

10. Deal with problems quickly.
9. Listen to those you work with and for.
8. Do not lose yourself to the job.
7. Administration is important and your job makes a difference.
6. Know standards and uphold them.
5. Be merciful and kind.
4. Be consistent.
3. Remember you were a student and faculty member.
2. You are a public figure.
1. You get paid for the 4:30 phone call on a Friday afternoon.

Many things are out of your control. Since I have only been a department head, my observations come from a very limited set, but often

the first level of administration is where the most important lessons are taught. Therefore I am comfortable with these observations, understanding that increasing responsibilities increase the gravity of all decisions. I do believe it is important to understand that administrators often have additional information that is utilized in their decision making. And hindsight often crystallizes both mistakes and brilliance, although errors are remembered more often for some reason.

In closing, let me reiterate my appreciation to the Southern Agricultural Economics Association

for this honor. It is my hope that we will continue our tradition of helping our fellow citizens inside and outside academia better understand the consequences of economic decisions.

### **References**

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