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STAFF PAPER

THE DEPARTMENT'S ROLE IN PREPARING INDIVIDUALS
AND TEAMS FOR THE CHALLENGE OF THE 1990s

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JUNE 1991
No. 91-22

Department of Agricultural Economics
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THE DEPARTMENT'S ROLE IN PREPARING INDIVIDUALS AND TEAMS

FOR THE CHALLENGE OF THE 1990s*

MARC A. JOHNSON*

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AND TEAMS FOR THE CHALLENGE OF THE 1990s**

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Challenges

Extension specialists must address at least five challenges to be successful in the 1990s: 1) the client's increasing opportunity cost of time; 2) low margins in a competitive economy; 3) greater uncertainty when dealing with an administered economy; 4) burgeoning supplies of education and services; and 5) gaining flexibility in a rigid, expertist economy.

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THE DEPARTMENT'S ROLE IN PREPARING INDIVIDUALS AND TEAMS

FOR THE CHALLENGE OF THE 1990s*

Marc A. Johnson**

I appreciate the opportunity to share my perspective on preparing and organizing our human capital base to meet extension challenges of the 1990s. I'll start with my own list of challenges and then develop a family model of an agricultural economics department to show how strong, relational departments will help extension specialists meet these challenges. Interdisciplinary work and issue-based programming have been given a lot of attention. Having been assigned the topic of "the Department's Role..." allows me to focus inwardly on creating a disciplinary environment that will supply productive, creative, flexible specialists who can lead agriculture through murky times. You also will learn why it irritates me to hear that "farmers have problems and universities have departments."

Challenges

Extension specialists must address at least five challenges to be successful in the 1990s: 1) the client's increasing opportunity cost of time; 2) low margins in a competitive economy; 3) greater uncertainty when farming is in an administered economy; 4) burgeoning suppliers of education and services; and 5) gaining flexibility in a rigid, separatist extension organization.

*Presented at the North Central Region Farm Management and Marketing Extension Committees' workshop "Meeting Marketing and Management Challenges of the 1990s," St. Louis, Missouri, May 9, 1991.

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Client Cost of Time -- Farms are getting fewer in number and larger in size. Farmers with small holdings have other jobs. So, every moment of time a manager spends on education is a moment spent not attending to a larger operation or to a more important source of income. The opportunity cost of farmers' time is increasing. The value of information gathered in each moment of time must increase.

County agents tell me that farmers are attending fewer county meetings, they demand immediate responses to specific questions, and they have learned to call specialists and researchers directly. In North Carolina, I used to mentally calculate meeting attendance less extension staff and less retirees. Often, the residual direct contact with operating producers was quite small. The way to contact real producers was to involve agents and producers in planning a longer-term curricular approach, in 2-day to 18-month programs.

Competitive Economy -- The farm economy is in a time of neither spectacular nor devastating returns. There is still overcapacity in food production compared with effective demand. Producer margins are low. Therefore, information is critical in making right choices. The information must be specific, sophisticated, correct, and timely. In May, 1990, several of our graduates went back to the farm. One graduated cum laude and another graduated magna cum laude. Tuesday, I conducted a senior exit interview with a young man with a 3.8 GPA who will be going back to farm with his brothers; already he is making the marketing decisions for the farm. Our clientele is increasingly well educated, and the survivors who are growing are sharp and have no patience for simple solutions or general information.

Growing Uncertainty -- The farm decision environment is increasingly complex, and the effects of decisions in the administered economy are

generating an increasing level of pure uncertainty. The decision environment contains more environmental regulation and fear, greater policy centralization, and more susceptibility to global market influences. Do farmers invest in on-farm grain storage when millers want identity-preserved grain quality, when insecticide labels are dropping faster than flies? Do farmers expand farm size when target prices are under perennial threats of reduction, when irrigation water use policy is in flux, when local residents are winning odor damage cases, when international and domestic trade and subsidy policies are in discussion? Risk taking and contingency planning for uncertainties are necessary when the greater influences on farm returns are nonmarginal administrative actions rather than marginal market actions.

Other Education Suppliers -- The work of extension needs to be changing. Extension has done farm records and financial statement education for years. Now, accountants, farm management associations, and software companies are offering alternatives with specific services. Extension has taught marketing for years. Now, farm marketing consultants and brokers are offering alternatives with specific services. There is a market for specific information. We can't claim information as a public good.

I have heard several circle-the-wagon arguments. Those competitors are in our territory. We offer unbiased, high quality information, implying that others offer biased and shoddy work. I succumb to this mentality from time to time. It is the easiest thing to do, when you can't come up with a new approach.

Recently, I was impressed by a real entrepreneur. He runs a small meat packing house and cheese factory near Manhattan, Kansas. As we had dinner together, I asked him how he competed with Excel and IBP, the meatpacking

giants. His answer was surprising. He said that what he is doing well today, Excel and IBP will be doing cheaper in three years. He constantly searches for the new niche to fill to stay ahead of the larger firms. He wasn't complaining about industry concentration or competition crowding him out; he was creatively searching for his next opportunity as his market changed.

Extension Organization -- The Kansas Cooperative Extension Service has presented a number of training programs on responding to change. I have to snicker a bit each time an enthused extension worker gets bitten by the new religion and declares that, after all, extension workers have been change agents all along.

Think about the organization. Extension services have built large bureaucracies to keep themselves isolated from the larger university and often to keep themselves isolated from their own colleges of agriculture. How many institutions have maintained a wedge between extension and Experiment Station Field Days, information agencies, financial control units, faculty governance, promotion and tenure decisions, and other services? Ken Farrell et al. called extension's isolation "cultural separatism." When groups live and work apart long enough, they lose their ability to interact and to respond to one another.

We maintain too many 100 percent extension appointments, which create 100 percent loyalty to one function. Over time, there is a growing feeling of self-importance and a discounting of the contributions of other functions to the point where journal articles, international assignments, and teaching become perceived as easy and less relevant than extension's contribution.

This institutional and individual inwardness makes extension rigid and bleeds away the ability to respond to new challenges. The solution of today

is to drag people out of their comfort zones and recognize that there are problems to be solved, by way of interdisciplinary issue-based programming. Generally, this is a useful step. There is another dimension, the departmental dimension, which also needs to be central in preparing for change.

The Departmental Family

An academic department can be viewed as a professional family, an organization with the means to develop the greatest potential in each faculty member and the greatest potential in the unit. Having come from disintegrated families and having experienced disintegrated departmental families, I can only idealize what a healthy family environment might produce. But I feel that we are getting close to such a professional family environment at Kansas State.

What do families provide to each individual? Families provide resources and sustenance, the food, clothing, and shelter sufficient to be healthy and proud of oneself. Families provide support so individuals can work and play together in a relaxed, familiar environment; where the kids can ask what swear words mean, partners can dream out loud about goals that may be beyond reach without feeling silly; and where everyone has a sense of worth. Families provide challenge for improvement, with a little pressure and encouragement to experience and achieve a little more than the individual might, if left to stay in bed all morning. Families provide evaluation via helpful, honest criticism that gives an outside view of how one looks, or sounds, or performs, based on a sincere desire to help the individual improve.

In the departmental family, resources and sustenance are represented by attempts to provide professional equipment, resource materials, travel

resources and experiences, and clerical services that facilitate a high level of quantity and quality of extension and research products, with minimal frustration. In other words, the department's job is to keep members happy. The key to making the most of available resources is for each individual to clearly list the kinds of resources necessary for effective operations. Then, the departmental leader can compare his or her shopping list with various sources of funds and procure what is necessary. I am sometimes amazed at what help other internal agencies will give, if presented a specific request. If allocated funds are insufficient, then a program fee structure or a grant can be constructed to cover a significant set of items.

State budget difficulties are amplified by the recession, but budget problems will persist. Grants and fees for programs, along with possible internal downsizing, will continue to be parts of our revenue sources to achieve extension's goals. The trick is to adjust the scope of work to the size of the resource base to prevent worsening the ratio of expectations to resources. Unrealistic expectations result in neuroses in any family member and functional breakdown. I have witnessed units that have successfully phased out programs because of resource shortages. In these cases, the entire institution must be informed and supportive in these cases to protect individuals involved in these programs.

Support in the departmental family means good collegueship. Modern communication technology could allow people to work independently from any location on earth with reporting by fax or modem. Departmental support comes from being together and exploring ideas, working on projects jointly, letting each other know their contributions are valuable, and encouraging individuals to press ahead with ideas for programs. Faculties encourage the search for

new opportunities and the taking of risks. Colleagues help each other out by sharing workloads, so individuals can get away for professional improvement or concentrated work on a new program.

Colleagueship support takes time and mutual respect. Finding out what your colleagues are doing and reviewing bulletin drafts takes time. But in the process, everyone grows together with intellectual stimulation, ideas for joint programs, and new twists on old themes. You all know what happens to families when individual members become selfish and refuse to interact with the rest of the family.

Mutual respect starts by departments hiring all faculty on a common standard. If you start by requiring different levels of skill in economic analysis for undergraduate teachers, extension specialists, and researchers, you start with a caste system without the opportunity for intermingling. If comments like "extension just teaches out of farm magazines" or "there is nothing relevant in journal articles" are allowed to pass without a stern rebuke, there is evidence of disrespect among colleagues. Disrespect is nearly an impermeable barrier to the type of communication that leads to personal growth.

The third departmental family function is the challenge for individual improvement. This challenge is created by a high level of expectation for economic knowledge, economic application, client development, and level and quality of output. Time and resources must be devoted to professional maintenance and improvement to ensure human capital effectiveness, as much as maintenance and refitting machinery capital is necessary to keep it functional. Professional improvement is needed in subject matter, delivery technique, and problem/perspective building. In a strong family, there is a

strongly held and shared set of ideals or principles. In a departmental family, there is a finely honed, shared knowledge of an academic discipline. Pressure to attend professional meetings and departmental seminars, to pursue economic inquiry with reporting to peers, to take sabbaticals in discipline-rich experiences, and to "talk economics" springs from the common expectation that we are all economists and we all will grow individually if all of our colleagues are good economists. There aren't different definitions of extension economics, research economics, and teaching economics. There are only good economic logic and inferior economic logic. Everyone in a department has shown talent for the discipline at least once in his/her life. It is up to the collective of the department to challenge each individual to develop that talent to the fullest.

If you were to ask me what the one most important role of the department is in preparing specialists to meet the challenges of the 1990s, if you were to ask me what the one most important role of the department is in keeping specialists flexible to meet new challenges, creative in solving problems, and good as interdisciplinary team members, I would answer that it is maintaining high expectations to be good economists by being good in the academic discipline. Economic analysis and knowledge of markets is what you have to offer. You keep those tools sharp in the departmental home and only then are you prepared to solve the farmer's problems.

Unfortunately, all of you probably know individuals who spent careers extending material that didn't venture far beyond the dissertations they wrote 30 years ago. I know a few. Unfortunately, all of you know individuals who feel more comfortable with their production science colleagues than with their departmental family members, because there is no pressure to stretch

themselves in their discipline. Unfortunately, all of you know individuals who say there isn't anything worthwhile in the journals, when in all honesty they haven't read journals lately to see if they do contain anything worthwhile. These are all examples of family failures, where the family allowed a member to drift away unchallenged. It was easier than confrontation, but everyone lost something in the process.

Finally, departmental families provide evaluation and honest criticism of economic logic and performance. This is done through program reviews, seminars and workshops, and paper reviews. Departments invest a lot of time and money in seminar and workshop series. Topics span the subject areas of the discipline and thinkers from outside the department and from within provide examples of economics at work. Attending seminars is an important opportunity to keep abreast of your field and involves an important responsibility to provide constructive criticism. Just and Rausser quote John Maynard Keynes as saying, "It is astonishing what foolish things one can temporarily believe if one thinks too long alone..." Presenting seminars is an important way to develop logical arguments, to present your theses for review by your colleagues, and to expose graduate students to extension economists. Reviewing papers and bulletins is an important contribution to constructive criticism, which improves the individual specialist and the quality of information delivered. Subjecting articles and bulletins for review is important both for professional growth and quality of product. When a department hires all faculty with similar economics credentials, there are no functional barriers across research, teaching, or extension to the importance of contributing to constructive criticism. All work should be reviewed, all faculty should present seminars, and all faculty should attend

seminars to provide commentary.

There are agricultural economics departments in which faculty do not present seminars because of an unspoken agreement that they don't criticize one another. That is a family breakdown, as in a family where members no longer talk to one another. In this case, an important avenue for growth is dysfunctional.

I hope you noticed that I mentioned formal departmental administrators only once in this paper. Department heads have formal responsibilities for acquiring and allocating resources, supporting faculty with outside groups, and challenging and evaluating faculty. In a departmental family, as in a personal family, the head of the household has to make some final decisions, but the richness of the resources, support, challenge, and evaluation come from every family member, every faculty member. Each faculty member takes a lot in individual growth and gives a lot to his/her colleagues.

Families and departmental families are in various states of harmony. Some are happy and well-adjusted and pull together. Others are contentious and pull apart. Really healthy family relationships require both individualism and a commitment to the unit. In departmental terms, this means individuals can achieve great success but a certain amount of time and contribution must be committed to one's colleagues and the institution.

At Kansas State, for example, we are building a healthy departmental family environment. The faculty maintain high expectations for economic expertise among their colleagues and for the level and quality of output. This is reinforced with close working relationships among specialists, researchers, and teachers; a fairly comprehensive review process; and good faculty participation in presentation and commentary in seminars. There is a

high degree of mutual respect among faculty across appointment categories. The results are terrific. Extension specialists appear as authors of journal articles, members of graduate committees, guest lecturers in class, and course instructors. Researchers appear on radio programs, as authors of extension publications, and as commentators on statewide extension programs. All of this interaction is not centrally directed. We just hire well-trained, decent human beings with a desire to see economics in action and encourage interaction and cross-overs in functions wherever it occurs. We give specialists and other faculty latitude to use their professional judgement about the kinds of teams they form to address issues. Good economists, encouraged by their colleagues to perform and given the freedom to respond to current issues, can address a broad range of issues.

Conclusion

My responsibility today was to address the role of the department in preparing individuals and teams for the challenges of the 1990s. The department is more than an administrative unit that allocates money and organizes a work load to accomplish a task. The department is a group of colleagues, who press one another to stretch their expertise and their imaginations to develop relevant programs. The department gives individuals the freedom to apply their science in whatever groups are necessary to solve an issue and supports their risk taking. The department is where the human capital base is maintained and improved and where the spirit of performance is kindled. The university has departments so it can solve farmers' problems.

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