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The “A” in SAEA – Agricultural... or Applied?

Hal Harris

I am perhaps not the best person to argue the case of *Agricultural Economics* over that of *Applied Economics*. When I came to Clemson in 1975, we were *Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology*. When the number of sociologists dropped to one in 1990, we became *Agricultural and Applied Economics*. Our Ph.D. program had already adopted the title *Applied Economics* in 1984. People like Jim Hite, Buddy Dillman, and Mark Henry were leaders in Environmental Economics and Rural Economic Development and were fans of *Applied Economics*. I strongly agreed with these name changes at the time. Clemson was in the vanguard of similar name changes across the country over the past 25 years. But, I wonder now if we were wise or not.

Clemson's Department of Applied Economics and Statistics has now been dismembered. Eight statistics faculty were sent to mathematics. Nine applied economics faculty members went to the College of Business' Economics Department. One faculty member joined the Sociology Department. The ones who went to Economics face an uncertain future because of widely different criteria for tenure and promotion. The agribusiness curriculum will be deleted when current enrollees graduate. A handful of extension and research faculty were sent to a new School of Agriculture, Forestry, and Environmental Science, where the concern is the lack of a critical mass.

If we had been Agricultural Economics, would this sudden and bizarre reorganization

have occurred? The answer is: *Possibly*. Certainly, the College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Life Sciences would have been more tenacious in supporting the department's presence in the college. We must take some of the blame. No matter what the title, we had lost a good bit of our good will with the industry and government institutions in the state because of the loss of 10 or so key faculty positions, mostly in extension. These were the eyes and ears of the department in working with the agricultural industry and government leaders. Our lay advisory committee had not met in a dozen years. Eight years ago, at the annual Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA) meeting in Mobile, I warned that some departments would be merged with economics or other departments. I never dreamed we would be the first in the region. What happened at Clemson is an affront to the Land Grant University concept. It is up to associations like this one and the faculty at academic departments represented here to support this concept, which I believe is still valid today. The dismantling of Agricultural/Applied Economics departments is perhaps the biggest threat to the long-term viability of this association.

Turning now directly to SAEA, we need to first recognize that *Agriculture*, as in our current title, is not a dirty word. These are boom times for farming, agribusiness, and trade. Many economists, myself included, believe that this prosperity is likely to persist for the coming 6 to 10 years. It reminds me of the 1970s, which were golden years for agricultural economics. Enrollments rose, more research funds became available, and extension education programs were in great demand.

Hal Harris is professor emeritus, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.

I seriously doubt that we will see a boom like that, but the strength of the farm and rural economy may give us the opportunity to fill critical departmental positions and increase student numbers, which will become more and more important in funding.

I looked at Wikipedia under the term *Applied Economics*. The encyclopedia states: "Applied economics is a term that refers to the application of economic theory and analysis. While not a field of economics, it is typically categorized by the application of economic theory and econometrics to address critical practical issues in a range of fields including demographic economics, labor economics, business economics, industrial organization, development economics, education economics, health economics, monetary economics, public economics, and economic history." (Swann, 2006). Agriculture is never mentioned, nor are any of our national or regional journals or associations. Whether we change the "A" or not, I would suggest that our leaders re-edit this Wikipedia page.

It would seem to be a given that our association's name reflect the titles of the departments that make up the bulk of our membership. A quick and dirty Google search of *applied economics* and *agricultural economics* revealed the following results. Of 38 departments in our discipline, the following titles dominate:

- Agriculture and Resource Economics 9
- Agricultural Economics 8
- Agricultural and Applied Economics 6
- Applied Economics 3
- Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology 3
- Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business 3

My conclusion is there certainly is no compelling need to switch from *agricultural* to *applied* based on departmental identities.¹

Based on a recent study by the Georgetown University Center for Education and Workforce,

and reported in *Yahoo News* (2011), Agricultural Economics majors were ranked seventh lowest in unemployment by major at 1.3%. The *Washington Post* recently reported, based on another study by Georgetown, that Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) had the third lowest unemployment rate among 15 majors at the undergraduate level at 5.4%, contrasted to 13.9% for Architecture majors (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Among graduate programs, ANR ranked fifth.

In January 2012, the agriculture deans of four prestigious universities (Ohio State, Purdue, Illinois, and Iowa State) offered powerful rebuttals to a *Yahoo* report stating that there was no future in a career in agriculture. Apparently, agriculture was defined in the report as farming only. The deans reported rapid enrollment growth and unlimited opportunities (Purdue Connections, 2012).

I noted with interest an announcement that Colorado State has instituted a new undergraduate degree program in agribusiness. This on-line course is designed for students who have completed 60 hours of transferable college credits. Now for a personal observation: A couple of months ago, my wife and I were tuned into the popular National Public Radio show, *Whadda Ya Know*.

During the show, the moderator, Michael Feldman, interviews members of the studio audience. One selected individual was asked the standard question, "What do you do in life?" The student replied that he was an applied economics major at the University of Wisconsin. Feldman asked the next question: "What is applied economics?" This question basically drew a blank from the student. "Are you going to continue in this major?" asked Feldman. The student blurted out that he was going to stick it out for a while because all the courses he had taken were math courses and he liked math.

In conclusion, I believe agricultural economics is a superior option to applied economics. My personal preference is agricultural and applied economics, but this makes for an awkward acronym (SAAAE), but it fits with our journal, the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*.

¹Others titles include: Agriculture; Environment and Development Economics; Agricultural Economics and Economics; Agriculture, Business and Applied Economics; Agriculture, Food and Resource Economics; Agricultural and Consumer Economics; and Food and Resource Economics.

Thanks to the leadership of SAEA for giving me the opportunity to be an active participant in these meetings once again.

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