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Why “Applied” Should be Included in the Name of Our Professional Association

John E. Lee, Jr.

So, here we are again, beating on a horse that, while not dead, is already out of the barn.

When asked to speak to the question of whether the word “applied” should be in the title of our association, I understood that I was to make the case for including “applied” in addition to the word “agriculture,” not replacing it. I think focusing narrowly on either “applied” or “agriculture” needlessly reduces our options, and, in my view, excludes the preferred option. My argument is for the title, Southern Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, or SAAEA. I am making a case for that change.

I know some of the arguments for sticking with only “agriculture” in our association’s title. It’s traditional, and change nudges us out of our comfort zone. Among our traditional supporters, especially in the state legislative budget committees, the term “agriculture” may resonate better than “applied.” “Agriculture” fits best with our traditional farm clientele (but not all of them, I would argue). Some of our members may feel that “agriculture” resonates best among our sister associations meeting in this annual southern gathering.

But, I don’t think we should be debating whether to take “agriculture” out of the title of our association. Rather, we should be discussing the pros and cons of adding the word “applied.” I will try to make the case that the pros outweigh the cons.

First, “applied” is really what we do. Extension has always been about “applied.” Undergraduate teaching is less about teaching students about abstract theory, and more about teaching them the importance of economics in their daily lives, that is, teaching them how to apply the concepts of economics to real life decisions. Most of our research is also applied, in contrast to much of the research in general economics. So much of what those who belong to our wing of the profession do, is to apply, and teach others how to apply, the concepts of economics to an ever-broadening array of issues.

“Applied” is not a dirty word. Recall Wassily Leontief’s praise of agricultural economics for the practical value of its applied work, and our profession’s willingness to work with real data on real problems. Some may feel that theoretical breakthroughs are more prestigious and career-enhancing than applied work. But, not all the Nobel Prizes have gone to economic theorists; witness T.W. Schultz, for example. More important, those of you working at the leading edge of applied economics are aware that some of the most useful breakthroughs in methodology and theory come from applied economists trying to improve the tools of the trade to solve practical problems. Think of the innovations that came out of the very applied goal of putting a man on the moon. Necessity is the mother of invention, and no one appreciates necessity as much as the applied economist who needs better methodology or theory to solve a real economic problem. So, in my view, the argument that being called an applied economist or belonging to an applied

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economics association is not as prestigious or is somehow more professionally limiting than being an “agricultural” economist is simply wrong.

Now, we could use just the word “applied” in our association’s title, rather than my suggested “agricultural and applied,” since our work in agriculture is mostly applied. A few former agricultural economics departments have done just that. But, that could cost us an important part of our identity, especially where that identity helps generate support for us. The word “applied” alone might also raise the hackles of other economics associations and departments, which would argue (correctly) that we have no exclusive claim on doing applied work. It would be awkward to address that concern by referring to our association as “Agricultural and Other Applied Economics.” Agriculture is still very important and has strong recognition power on our campuses and especially among those we serve, and whose support is still important.

The issue of whether to add the word “applied” to the title of a professional association was debated extensively in 2007–2008 in our national association, the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA). So as to not re-invent the wheel, I will summarize the rationale for changing to the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association.

- The name includes all the new directions in which traditional agricultural economics departments are heading. It is inclusive.
- The name provides continuity with the past.
- The name provides the greatest flexibility for the future.
- The name has the potential for embracing faculty hired into, but trained outside of, traditional agricultural economics departments who work in non-traditional areas.
- The name change achieves the goal of appealing to a broader group of faculty, students, and clientele.
- “Applied” is the one word that includes major new areas of emphasis in many of our departments such as consumer economics, rural development, international development, natural resources, labor, land use and urbanization,

agribusiness, public health, and other areas on the periphery of mainline agricultural economics departments and in which there is growing opportunity.

The name change was supported by a majority of AAEA members who voted, and was most strongly supported by younger members of the profession. They are our future. Some AAEA members objected to the new name as not descriptive enough to attract professionals with specific interests. But, does “resource economics” cover consumer economics, rural development, agribusiness, public health, etc.? Does “agribusiness” attract those working on environmental issues? We could cover our bets by putting all the specialties in our association title, and calling it the “Southern Agricultural, Resource, Environmental, Consumer, Food, Public Health, Labor, and Other Economics Association” or the SARECFPHLA. That’s a bit awkward! In all these fields, our main work is applied, and the term “applied” includes all.

Other members of AAEA expressed concern that “applied” seems to exclude basic research. I have already addressed that concern. What is “basic” anyway?

In the nation’s 1862 Land Grant departments, only nine have retained the traditional name, “Agricultural Economics.” Six of these are in the South and border states. In the 1890 universities, there are no departments with the traditional name. Eleven departments now include the word “applied” in their titles, five of them in the South. Other departments include in their titles a variety of specialized subjects, such as resource, agribusiness, management, community development, policy, food, and consumer. The most frequent other word is “resource.” Some department titles include more than two of these subjects, but still leave out other subjects in which their faculty are involved. At least 16 of the 1862 Land Grant departments no longer have the word “agriculture” in their titles at all.

A glance at a few agricultural economics related journals reveals the rich array of subjects to which agricultural economists are now applying their skills. Here are some examples:

- Agricultural production and marketing, including risk management;
- Industrial organization;
- Domestic regional and rural economic development;
- International development;
- Gaming strategy for trade negotiations;
- Endangered species;
- Food supply chains;
- Food nutrition and health;
- Food policies, including taxing bad food habits;
- Carbon sequestration, and cap and trade;
- Energy;
- Experimental economics;
- Mineral economics;
- Trade and trade policies; and
- Others.

I recall a few years ago, some of the faculty at Purdue were heavily involved in analyses of electric utilities and power rates, at the request of the state of Indiana. None of the subjects on this list of activities involving agricultural economists are excluded by the term "applied."

How Would Adding the Word "Applied" to our Association Title Play to our Various Stakeholders?

Undergraduates

My guess is that having some of their professors belong to the SAAEA as opposed to the SAEA wouldn't even enter the thought process of undergraduates. However, adding the word "applied" to your department's name would make a major there no less attractive, and might make it easier to explain to prospective students the wide range of subjects covered that could lead to careers other than in subjects dealing with traditional agricultural production and marketing. Bottom line: adding the word "applied" to either the association's name or to a department's name would likely have no negatives and only small positives with regard to undergraduates.

Graduate Students

The name change to SAAEA should be a modest plus, since graduate students tend to

become more specialized and sometimes more involved in professional associations. A more inclusive name helps convey that there is a broad range of topics on which they can work, and that there is a place for them in our professional association if their interests are not in traditional or mainstream agricultural economics. As for departmental titles, the name of the department may not be an issue for home-grown graduate students who already know what the department does. However, when recruiting graduate students from outside your undergraduate body, the word "applied" may help signal a broader range of choices in the course of study and research.

Faculty

Broadening the name of our association may appeal to younger faculty members who have broader interests and sometimes less traditional training, as well as non-agricultural backgrounds. Changing the name certainly can't narrow the field of potential association members because the word "agriculture" would still be in the title. Likewise, changing the names of departments to include "applied" could support departmental efforts to cast wider nets in recruiting candidates for faculty positions.

Southern Association of Agricultural Sciences

I don't believe that adding "applied" to our association's name will have any negative effect on relations with fellow associations in this annual gathering. We are in an age where the old academic and disciplinary boundaries are becoming blurred as the various sciences are reaching across disciplinary lines to foster new scientific breakthroughs. If broadening the association's name leads to a broader appreciation among our fellow scientists of the wide range of subjects to which we are applying our expertise, that would be a plus. It could lead to opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinary sessions.

Others

I can't see that changing the name of our professional association to include the word

“applied” will make much difference to our university colleagues, to our traditional farm and agribusiness stakeholders, or to those who appropriate funds for us. I do believe that broadening names of departments could be a positive, as long as the word “agriculture” is still there. State legislators tend to respond to two forces: support from the various lobby and constituent groups, and awareness of the kinds of issues on which you can provide them information and analysis. The greater their appreciation for our ability to help them on issues beyond traditional agriculture, the greater might be their inclination to support us. If we can keep our partnership with commercial agriculture, plus broaden our services to groups with concerns about food, rural development, energy, trade, labor, etc., we can have more constituencies with a stake in our being funded. We can also say to our commercial agriculture stakeholders that our portfolio is broadening, just as the issues they have to address are getting broader and more complex. The more

progressive and visionary farmers and agribusiness leaders will appreciate that point.

I also believe that changing names of departments to include “applied” can make a statement to other departments and colleges on campus. It is like announcing, “Hey, we’re not some narrow, outmoded discipline tucked off in a corner of the campus. We solve, and teach others to solve, problems in a wide range of subjects directly and indirectly related to the agri-food-resource system.” That could lead to some inter-departmental collaboration, joint grant writing, and greater visibility to upper administration.

Changing the name of our association is not a life or death issue. But, it is not unimportant. Changing our name to the Southern Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, SAAEA, has no downside, in my view, and could bring modest-to-substantial benefits. The change would be in keeping with the mainstream of the profession, and with the shifting focus of what we do.