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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. If 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 pro-

found 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

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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.

One of the greatest challenges for today's policy educator is to avoid treating problems too narrowly or too superficially of a problem. Policy analysis must be accurate and useful. This requires both depth and breadth; rigor and timeliness. The task is daunting but not impossible if individuals are to recognize the complexities and prepare accordingly.

Educators Need Renewal

The first and foremost objective of the policy educator should be a personal commitment to continuing professional education. Economists, like

their colleagues in medicine or engineering, must stay current in the theories and practices of their chosen field. For the policy educator, this means approaching new fields and refining old skills. For example, human nutrition is one field that is part of the new agricultural policy agenda. Teaching and communication skills may appear old hat. But they remain critical to the success of the policy educator. Increased accessibility of video technologies provide new opportunities for those with effective communication skills to enhance the impact of their extension activities.

Policy educators should commit themselves to the art of translation. Though knowledge of Mandarin or Portuguese would not hurt in this age of international competition, the most urgent need is in adapting the language of economics to the problems of people. What do we mean by problems in the effective demand for agricultural products? Why does failure to account for the externalities affect the quality of the water supply? Addressing these questions is important but rendered almost impossible, if terms and concepts are poorly understood, or not applied correctly.

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 may be sentimental or impetuous; actions for the public should be prudent. The contributions of a reinvigorated group of policy educators at the nation's land grant universities could help make public choices a bit clearer in the years ahead. **C**