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# THE LAND GRANT SYSTEM: *There Can Be A Future*

by Leroy J. Hushak

U.S. farm numbers have declined from around 6 million in 1940 to slightly over 2 million in 1986. At least 1.6 million of these units are operated as part-time farms by households which are fully employed off the farm or are retired. That leaves slightly more than a half-million commercial farms. Is the political force of 600,000 farm firms strong enough to sustain the land grants and USDA? My guess is that it is not.

For many years the colleges of agriculture with the support of USDA have conducted research and education programs focused on (1) agricultural industry, (2) rural communities, (3) natural resources, (4) home economics, and (5) 4-H. With the exception of home economics, these programs are "farm dominated." We have never gotten beyond a feeling of discomfort when dealing with nonfarm industries and interest groups. We talk about serving the "food and fiber industry," but Reisch, for example, argues that even though we proclaim all of agriculture as our domain, we do little about any but the production area. With few exceptions, the land grants have been unwilling to devote significant research and educational resources to nontraditional areas such as the rural community or natural resources.

With few farm children left to recruit through 4-H and FFA, the traditional stream of students is disappearing. Our graduate programs have maintained student numbers, but not in the more traditional areas of production, management, and marketing. The budgets of Cooperative Extension Services have been declining for many years. Experiment Stations have been able to maintain research budgets at relatively higher levels in large part because the researcher is least constrained by the mission of the land grant system. In addition, individual researchers can more easily obtain outside funds to supplement their research efforts.

Cameron, whose studies focus on the management of budgets during conditions of institutional decline, argues that "doing the right things" is much more important than "doing things right." In a similar vein it is time for colleges of agriculture and the USDA to start asking what are some of the right things to do. Shrinking budgets and student enrollments suggest that the original land grant mission is obsolete. We must examine how that original mission can be revised—perhaps drastically—for

**> There are viable missions on which the land grant system can build. I suggest incorporation of the total rural community and an international perspective. An expanded vision is necessary. It is time for land grants to celebrate the solving of the "agricultural problem" in the United States. We no longer have food shortages. Since the 1930s, 90 percent of farm employment has been transferred off the farm. We find ourselves in the same situation as rural communities which can no longer survive on farm activity alone. Those rural communities which are dynamic and growing are those which have looked beyond the farm, beyond agriculture, to alternative sources of growth and development.**

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the 21st century. If the land grants are to survive, if shrinking programs and budgets are to be reversed, if land grants are to remain an integral part of local, state and national policy debates, then we must look at the alternatives before us while there are still opportunities to choose among them. The nonagriculture components of land grant universities are leaving agriculture far behind in developing missions for the 21st Century.

## The Right Things

As Fred Hutchinson, Vice President for Agriculture at The Ohio State University, put it in his 1986 inaugural address: it is time to consider "repositioning (our work) to effectively serve our future clientele. We must decide to whom we want to appeal, or whom we want to serve, in the future."

To me, the key issue is: how can we reposition Colleges of Agriculture so that we can look beyond agriculture while at the same time we continue to serve agriculture in an effective manner? For example, suppose we repositioned our farm, agribusiness, horticultural, forest products, and small business management programs and resources into a single small/rural business management program. Such a change could make it possible to serve thousands of small business owners/managers from rural areas by our programs. These people are in greater need of management skills than our current farm and agribusiness clientele. Would such a change provide the political support needed to increase our resource base? If it does, then it may be true that we can serve our traditional farm, agribusiness, horticulture, and forest product clientele more effectively than we do currently, even if we devote as few as 30-40 percent of total resources to these groups. We may be able to add experts on taxes, finance, sales, and other specialists important to any successful business to our staff.

It is critical to make the missions of Cooperative Extension and resident instruction mutually consistent. For example, the launching of a small/rural business resident instruction program would benefit from a similar program for small/rural businesses

through Cooperative Extension and vice versa.

Repositioning Cooperative Extension is likely to be even more difficult than repositioning resident instruction or research simply because it directly affects current support groups. We must convince these support groups that the land grant is not abandoning them while at the same time, in the short run at least, direct resources to new programs that will generate increased financial support in the future.

## Image, Too

Doing the right thing calls for doing more than programs related to agriculture. The image of the present colleges of agriculture must extend beyond agriculture. Agricultural sciences will not do it! Most people who work within agricultural industries, or food and fiber, no longer identify with production agriculture. We need to think in terms of colleges of rural America, colleges of small/rural business, and colleges of natural resources and rural communities. In some cases the word agriculture can remain as part of the image. In others it would be better if it did not.

## For More Information

"The Future of the Agriculture Establishment: Where To From Here" by Leroy J. Hushak, in the Summer Issue of *Ohio Challenge* published by The Ohio State University.

"Strategic Responses to Conditions of Decline: Higher Education and the Private Sector" by Kim Cameron in *Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 54, No. 4.

"Revitalizing Land Grant Universities: It's Time to Regain Relevance" by G. Edward Schuh in the Second Quarter 1986 issue of *CHOICES*.

"Land-Grant Colleges of Agriculture: Renegotiating Or Abandoning A Social Contract" by George R. McDowell in the Second Quarter 1988 issue of *CHOICES*.

## Potential New Directions

Several potential and suggestive directions for Colleges of Agriculture and USDA are identified in what follows. Irrespective of how we define our future mission, we need to significantly increase the rigor of college undergraduate programs. While many of us needed remedial courses at the Land Grant university because our rural high schools did not offer the necessary mathematics and science courses, our children often graduate from high school with preparation in mathematics and basic sciences which exceeds what we require in our agriculture programs. How can we expect to attract superior high school students if our programs are less rigorous than their high school programs?

In particular, as Bloom argues, the core basic liberal arts and sciences courses should be expanded. At Ohio State, Agricultural Economics B.S. graduates currently do not receive the mathematics, statistics, and economic theory needed to enter graduate programs in Agricultural Economics, including our own, unless they go beyond the basic requirements. It is difficult even for those students who want this background to obtain the right courses because our college-based programs are constrained to satisfy the needs of several departments. An alternative is to let our stronger departments develop their own programs so that they can compete in today's market.

Many of the issues identified are already addressed slightly differently. Departments of agricultural economics have large numbers of faculty members with management skills. Presently these resources address the problems of a declining farm and agribusiness clientele, most of whom we find harder to justify serving because of their wealth and income. Some of these management oriented faculty members could just as effectively serve and relate to small/rural business clientele.

In contrast land grants continue to ignore the large number of relatively small individual proprietorships who serve residents of rural communities, including farm households. The proprietors of these firms, many of whom do not have schooling beyond high school and do not have advanced management education, come much closer to fitting the original objectives of the land grant mission than the large farm and agribusiness firms which now receive so much attention. These proprietors have need of basic management education, can be served by both Cooperative Extension and resident instruction, and are of little interest to colleges of business.

Similar rationales exist for extending our efforts in other directions. For example, U.S. food shortages in the future are unlikely. But this is not true of many other parts of the world. As a world leader in agriculture, land grants can contribute signifi-

cantly to world agricultural development. In addition, the United States has a vested interest in seeing that other countries do not adopt harmful environmental production techniques. Sustainable agriculture, substitution of flow for stock resources, deforestation, and water pollution have both international and domestic components. International aspects of these issues have large potential impacts on the U.S. environment.

In many ways, the viability of the rural community is more critical to the well-being of farm households than is the farm situation. Farm households currently earn over 50 percent of their incomes from off-farm sources. Traditional agricultural policies of subsidies to farmers will not solve the viability problems of rural communities. Programs such as Ohio Cooperative Extension's "Retention and Expansion of Existing Businesses in Rural Communities" are likely to have much larger impacts on community viability than commodity subsidies. Rural communities need leaders to carry out these programs and they need the assistance of Outreach Education in order to learn how to use state and Federal resources which are available to them. No one is likely to serve these needs in our rural counties if Cooperative Extension does not take on the task.

## Land Grants Are Needed

The land grant has served us well. It can continue to do so if it broadens its mission. If the land grant system disappears, we will need to create new systems to perform similar vital functions for other industries. The National Sea Grant program is based on the land grant model; in Ohio, Extension Advisory Services is part of Ohio Cooperative Extension. The Ohio Technology Transfer Organization (OTTO) combines resident and outreach instruction, but lacks the research component, a serious shortcoming of the program. The minority recruitment program of Ohio State is rapidly creating an outreach component. To be successful, I believe an educational mission must also be carried into minority communities.

Can the structure of land grant colleges be adopted to these and other new needs and opportunities? I believe it can but will require that key personnel be willing to accept higher levels of risk and new challenges.

## SOME POTENTIAL NEW DIRECTIONS FOR COLLEGES OF AGRICULTURE AND THE USDA

### Small/Rural Business Management

### International Agriculture

Agricultural Biotechnology  
Flows of Agricultural Products  
Soil Ecology

### Potential New Uses of Flow Resources

Sustainable Agriculture  
Substitution of Sustainable Flow Resources for Stock Resources  
Recreation Industries  
Forest Resources  
Water Resources

### Rural Community Viability

Rural Leadership  
Rural Industry and Employment Structure

Retention and Expansion  
New Business Formation  
Business Location and Transfer  
Role of Primary Production  
Community Environment  
Community Services

### Family/Household Behavior

Family Formation  
Consumption Patterns  
Community Location Preferences  
Food Safety

### Environmental

Pesticides and Other Toxic Substances  
Ground and Surface Water Quality