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THERE IS A FUTURE FOR THE LAND GRANTS, IF . . .

by David L. Debertin

Aggregate demand for nearly every major agricultural commodity is inelastic. Thus, total revenue is increased by reducing, not increasing, agricultural production. Agricultural research increases production, but the resulting reduction in farm prices causes aggregate gross farm income to decline. Even technologies designed to reduce production costs increase aggregate production levels and result in a reduction in gross farm income.

In contrast to farmers as a whole, “early adopters” benefit from agricultural research as costs are reduced and production increases, but before prices decrease from the increased production of the many later adopters. Ultimately, prices for commodities affected by the new technologies decrease proportionately more than production is increased, aggregate farm income drops, and farmers as a group—particularly the late adopters—are in worse shape than before.

The Ag College Administrator’s Problem

Agricultural college administrators are placed in a difficult position in institutional program planning, resource allocation, and increasing political support for agricultural research. Three options are possible.

Three Alternatives

• *Option 1: Continue to Primarily Serve Commercial Farmers.* The first alternative is to continue to devote most resources to output-increasing technical production research and rely on early-adopting farmers and their commodity groups for primary political support. This alternative is risky given the rate of decline in commercial farm numbers, the decreasing comparative importance of the commercial farming sector, and the potential erosion of political support for output-enhancing agricultural research by politically more important groups such as urban consumers and environmentalists. Early adopters, a traditional base of support for agricultural research, will probably not be able to provide sufficient political support to sustain agricultural research funding even at current real levels, and ag college administrators will be confronted with the problem of managing the downsizing.

• *Option 2: Build a Political Support Base Among Consumers.* A second alternative is to continue emphasis within agricultural colleges on increasing agricultural output, but to broaden the political and funding support base by embracing consumers who benefit from agricultural research in the form of lower food prices and a safer, higher-quality food supply. Consumers, not farmers nor their commodity groups, should be the political support base for the “lion’s share” of agricultural research funding. This type of political support will be achieved only if college administrators seek out consumer advocates and provide them with opportunities for contributions to the setting of research agendas similar to that now given to traditional agricultural constituencies. Urban legislators

and congressmen should strongly support agricultural research. Since low-income people usually spend a higher proportion of their incomes on food, low-income urban dwellers are primary beneficiaries of the benefits from agricultural research.

• *Option 3: Emphasize the Problems of Non-farm Rural Residents and Non-commercial Farmers.* The third alternative is to redefine the mission of agricultural colleges to focus primarily on improving the well-being of all rural residents, farm or non-farm. Many agricultural administrators would probably argue that this is already the case. But a genuine focus will require substantial reallocation of funds away from output-expanding research, and toward social and economic research dealing with the problems of non-farm rural people, poor as well as rich, and farmers that have not traditionally been a major source of political support for agricultural research. These include part-time farmers, organic farmers, and farmers with limited financial resources for adopting new technologies.

Research emphasis will change, with some departments losing faculty as other departments grow in size. Rather than playing a limited role, social scientists interested in improving the well-being of non-farm rural residents and farmers in these other categories could strongly influence the research agendas at agricultural colleges. This option will likely meet resistance from technical production scientists, commodity groups and their “early adopter” members.

A Broader Support Base is Essential

As the number of commercial farmers declines, agricultural college administrators must build a broader political base of support to these other groups. Conflicts between what consumers want (as well as environmentalists, organic farmers and animal-rights activists) and what politically powerful and commodity-oriented commercial farmers want will be the primary administrative agenda item over the coming decade.

For most colleges of agriculture, diminishing commercial farm numbers makes the first alternative no longer viable. The second alternative is a possibility, but will require more than token efforts at involving consumer groups in research agenda-setting. Underlying this option are the philosophies that forged support leading to the formation of land grant universities in the 19th century.

The third alternative is the most challenging, but it is the one I would advocate as the best option in planning for the 21st century. This alternative provides the greatest opportunity to sustain a sizable publicly supported research program at colleges of agriculture. Already, some commercial farmers are uncomfortable with the prospect of “their” college of agriculture establishing and building linkages to groups supporting agendas for colleges of agriculture deemed in conflict with commercial farming interests. However, colleges of agriculture have a broad mission of service, not only to selected, politically powerful, commodity-oriented farmers, but to these other groups as well.

Bringing both rural and urban consumers into the political support base could also have a high long-run payoff in state and federal support for agricultural research. But first, consumers need to be convinced that they, not farmers, are the ultimate beneficiaries of most of the gains from agricultural research. Building a coalition among commercial farmers, part-time and limited resource farmers, consumers, environmentalists, and others will not be easy. Many conflicts are likely to arise when choices must be made between funding for research that lowers production costs for early adopters, research that leads to a safe, low-cost, high-quality food supply produced with technologies that show concern for the environment, and research that devotes primary attention to problems of the rural non-farm sector such as rural non-farm job opportunities, education, and health care.

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