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The Land Grant College System in Transition

by Don Paarlberg

Americans pride themselves on being willing to change and adopt new ways. But we seldom reflect upon what it involves. There are three components of the change process. One of these is *technology*, another the *institutional arrangement* which supports the technology, and the third is the *rhetoric* which undergirds the system. In an enterprise that is essentially static, these three elements support each other. Such was the case for agriculture in the 19th century. The technology was horse and hoe, the institution was the Land Grant college system, and the rhetoric endorsed the family farm.

When change comes, it comes first to technology, which has the least commitment to the past. Change comes next to the institutions, which feel the pressure of changing technology. Gradually and reluctantly, with groans and complaints, the institutions change. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the public, the media, and politicians, continues to support the past. It is the last to budge.

Land Grant Changes

Consider how these concepts apply to the Land Grant college system. Change came first to agricultural technology: in power, in chemistry, in biology, in information systems, and in management. It was a veritable revolution in how food and fiber was produced. As a consequence, farmer after farmer and their children joined the largest migration the world has ever witnessed—the movement from farms to the cities.

Slowly, and with many a backward glance, the institution changed. It had to change, or face extinction. The Land Grant system prides itself on being an agent of change. It is such an effective change agent that it transformed itself.

What began 130 years ago as an effort to prepare white, young, American farm men to farm now prepares white and non-white men and women from the United States and elsewhere for a variety of different jobs, both on and off the farms.

The experiment stations began as almost the sole source of agricultural knowledge. They now share that role with the biology departments of the Land Grants and other universities, agribusiness firms, the National Institutes of Health, the National Academy of Sciences, the International Research Network, independent research institutions, and numerous agencies of the federal government—not just the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The discovery of new agricultural knowledge has become interdisciplinary, long-term, and big-ticket.

Agricultural extension began as almost the sole supplier of new information for farm people. But farm people now get new information directly from researchers at the experiment station, from the suppliers of capital equipment and chemicals, and from the agricultural press.

Rhetoric Lags

Meanwhile, agricultural rhetoric, the last of the three elements of change to transform itself, continues to support the old family farm. Some time ago I had a frank conversation with a Congressman. I said, "You keep praising the old family farm, but you vote for programs that help the huge superfarms, which erode away the family farms. You are inconsistent." He replied, "I say it's consistent. It consistently gets me elected."


An earlier example of this kind of lag comes from the Industrial Revolution. Technology led, replacing cottage industry with the factory and putting pressure on the guilds which supported cottage industry. Finally the guilds disappeared and the rhetoric that underlay the earlier system was eroded.

The 21st Century

What can we expect to happen to the Land Grant college system in the 21st century? Slowly agriculture is losing its uniqueness. It is leaving the backwater and entering the mainstream, where it will have to learn to navigate. Public support for institutions that serve a diminishing number of people will decrease, as will the number of Land Grant colleges. The agricultural disciplines—agricultural economics, agricultural engineering, agricultural biology, agricultural chemistry, agricultural business, agricultural statistics—will gradually be absorbed by their parent disciplines. Agricultural colleges and agricultural courses will lose much of their uniqueness. Their research will become more interdisciplinary and large-scale, with the agricultural components hard to identify. Agricultural extension will respond increasingly to the felt needs of off-campus people, for whom non-farm matters rank high.

In summary, technology, institutions, and rhetoric approached a state of harmony which surrounded the Land Grant college system for many years. But now these three features are in conflict. And so long as technological change continues, these three will continue to be in discord.

The biological law is "adapt or die." The institutional imperative for the Land Grants is the same, lagged a generation or two. Unfortunately, the rhetorical verbiage will continue to lag seriously as many continue to mislead people about their commitment to the family farm.

We should not overlook that institutional lag and rhetorical lag serve a useful purpose: providing needed continuity. If we responded fully and quickly to technological change, society might fall into disarray. While the pace of change in our institutions and rhetoric has been too slow, some lag does permit accommodation without inducing chaos. There is a balance to be struck. Technological changes are the wing feathers, propelling us forward, while institutions and rhetoric are the tail feathers, keeping us on course. Both are needed if we are to fly. 

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