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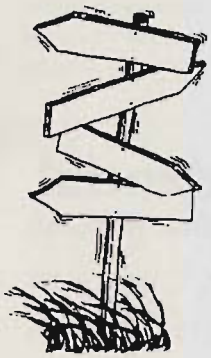
by Jim Hanson ■ **In Short**



Jobs for Extension Economists: A Growth Area?

In an analysis of the opportunities and challenges in cooperative extension for agricultural and resource economists, I conducted a survey (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service list serve) of chairs of agricultural and resource economics departments in the United States in spring 1997 and was able to obtain responses from all fifty states. An interesting finding of my survey was that there are significant job opportunities for extension economists at land grant universities. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Relative to the late 1980s, is there "increased/about the same/decreased" public pressure in your state for extension programming provided by agricultural and natural resource economists?
2. In the next five years, how many of your total departmental faculty do you estimate will retire (including those for which a search is currently being conducted)? What is the average extension percentage appointment for these lines?
3. If your dean approved the immediate search for two extension positions in your department, in what extension specialty/subject matter would you want them to work?
4. Are extension faculty in your department on tenure track appointments?

Three states did not have extension specialists in departments and, as a result, did not answer questions 1, 3, and 4; and two states had two departments that responded. As a result, my sample sizes (with one abstention on question 1) were 48, 52, 49, and 49 for questions 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

In the survey of chairs, 54 percent said that, relative to the late 1980s, there is increased pressure by the public for extension programing by economists, 33 percent said there is the same pressure, and 13 percent said there is decreased pressure. A summary of the comments by the 87 percent facing increased or similar pressure would include two points. First, there is increased pressure as a result of new regulations facing farmers and the radical changes made in the 1996 farm bill. Second, traditional services are still in demand, but increased pressure has come from new areas such as resource/environment, small business, and community development/leadership. In other words, increased demand for extension services comes more from extensive pressure (many new areas) than from intensive pressure (more services in traditional areas).

The chairs estimated that 195 people will retire over the next five years from departments of agriculture and resource economics. Of those retirees, there were 71.6 extension full-time equivalents (FTEs), or 37 percent of the total. If new people were hired with an average extension appointment of 75 percent, then 49 percent of all new departmental hires over the next five years would have extension responsibilities.

Chairs provided suggestions for extension specialty/subject matters they wanted. They were marketing and risk, 29 percent ; farm management and finance, 20 percent; natural resource and/or environment, 18 percent; community and rural economic development, 16 percent; agriculture business, 11 percent; and other specialities, 6 percent.

According to the chairs, 63 percent of the departments have academic tenure for their specialists, 21 percent have a mix in which some are tenured and some have different contractual relationships, and 16 percent of the departments do not tenure their specialists in academic ranks. Tenure arrangements vary for extension specialists and these differing appointments may prove problematic for recruiting new employees at certain institutions.

Employment opportunities for extension economists are increasing. There are important issues and problems facing society; extension faculty have a chance to be directly involved in developing solutions and providing leadership. As a result, department chairs need to make sure that they are providing sufficient support for their prospective employees. Graduate students need opportunities to work with extension faculty, mentoring programs should be instituted for new extension faculty when they are hired, individual departments should reevaluate their tenure procedures so that extension faculty are reviewed according to their job descriptions (a basic tenet of the business world), and our professional associations should offer programs and services that reflect the broader interests of these applied economists. ■

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