The ancillary force in the destiny of California's agriculture was water. The pattern of landholding was influenced by the dual system of water rights, and the conflicts arising out of doctrinal differences pertaining to public lands, mining, settlement, and the original grantees. The struggle for land was often a struggle for water. In 1902, the government sought to distribute the benefits of irrigation more widely through the Reclamation Act, to little avail. In this set of essays, Gates' approach to the water question is tangential. While he mentions some of the water issues, it is usually in the context of the overall landownership question.

How well do the laws and events of the mid-19th century explain resource and agricultural conditions in today's California? Gates makes no explicit claims, but the act of historical reporting itself a claim to relevance. Certainly some of the concentration in landholdings of today can be linked to the earlier actions of Chapman, Miller and Lux, Haggm and others. But, if the message of recent developments in nonlinear dynamics is correct, then perhaps some insignificant little event during the gold rush may have produced an outcome totally different from anything we could imagine today. Who knows?

This set of essays, originally written for different publications at different times, contains some repetition, but it is an exceptionally rich source of background on California's agricultural landholding. While it cannot explain some of California's peculiar tax policies of recent years, it can suggest some origins of the present landownership and agricultural production patterns. Unless you are of the "history is bunk" school of economics, curl up with a copy of Gates' book for a few hours, and you will become wiser.

A Useful Reference on Policy


Reviewed by Sam Evans

This ambitious book by M C Hallberg is "aimed at providing the basic tools and information needed for future agricultural policy analysis and development." Nevertheless, the book is targeted to undergraduate students, presumably at the junior or senior level since there is emphasis throughout the book on standard techniques of welfare analysis. Hallberg believes the book could also serve as an introductory text in graduate-level courses on agricultural policy.

Hallberg's book contains a great deal of descriptive and historical information on income and price support programs for farm commodities. Thus, it may be a useful reference for anyone interested in learning more about the development and scope of U.S. agricultural policy. The book has a 20-page Appendix which provides a chronological listing and brief summary of legislation having a major impact on U.S. agriculture. The listing begins with the Homestead Act of 1862 and ends with the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990. There is also a 28-page Glossary of farm program provisions, public and private institutions, and economic concepts related to agricultural policy and policy analysis. The Appendix, Glossary, and a well-thought-out Bibliography could be helpful for the experienced policy analysts as well as students and newcomers to the field.

Hallberg's book is divided into four sections: The Policy Environment, The Benefits And Costs of Farm Programs, Policy Analysis, and Prologue To The Future. The focus of the book is on compensation policy—income and price support programs. Consequently, about three-fourths of the book (sections 1 and 3) is devoted to descriptions and analyses of various supply control and demand expansion programs. There are, however, single chapters on trade policy and resource policy. The author does a workmanlike job throughout, but as might be expected in a book targeted to students, there is little new in content and presentation.

There are bound to be errors of commission and omission in a book that attempts to describe and analyze the broad array of U.S. farm programs. A substantive error of commission appears twice, on pages 28 and 352, where it is incorrectly stated that production from flexible acres is not eligible for nonrecourse of marketing loans. I also found Hallberg's estimates of commodity program costs confusing, even after his lengthy explanation of how they were calculated (chapter 5). The author does not rely on or cite USDA's "official" estimates of commodity program costs. Instead, he has made his own calculations. I would not make a point of this if the differences were small, but as an...
example of the differences, Hallberg estimates commodity program costs for fiscal 1986 at $43 billion, compared to USDA's estimate of $26 billion.

As for errors of omission, Hallberg, in my opinion, devotes too much space to historical programs and too little to the fundamental policy changes in the 1985 and 1990 U.S. farm legislation. Recent changes in policy are aimed at increasing market-orientation and export competitiveness and protecting the environment, and they reflect budget realities. These changes and why they were made are the best clues to policy choices for the future.

A Potpourri of Ideas on Undergraduate Education

Agriculture and the Undergraduate: Proceedings. By the National Research Council, Board on Agriculture Staff National Academic Press, 1992, 268 pages, $33

Reviewed by Neil E. Harl

The greatest contribution of most proceedings of conferences on undergraduate teaching is useful ideas for those concerned with resource allocation in academe and those involved directly with curriculum building. The modest volume Agriculture and the Undergraduate is no exception. The essays and the reports from discussion sessions at the 1991 conference from which the volume emanated provide a rich lode of insights, observations, and experiences on ways to nudge the curriculum reform process. The volume is a potpourri of ideas on ways to improve undergraduate education. Some good. Some not so good. Some trivial. Some not so trivial. But all are deserving of careful thought and further reflection.

And yet the volume is laced with disturbing and troubling statements that deserve wider discussion than was received by this select group oriented heavily toward research in the physical and biological sciences.

A fundamental aspect of any effort at curriculum reform is the set of assumptions about employment challenges over the lifetime of graduates. One obvious component of that set of assumptions, at least for education related to a particular sector or subsector of the economy, is the direction likely to be taken by that sector or subsector over the next several decades. One cannot disagree seriously with the observation by Charles Hess in terms of education in agriculture. The period before the 1970s emphasized production agriculture. Moreover, one cannot fault his statement that educational patterns in the 1970s reflected a decided shift toward economics and business, and his observation that in the 1980s greater attention was given to the underlying sciences, especially the biological sciences. But what is not at all clear is that the 1980s emphasis on science, particularly on biotechnology, will continue to be the polestar guiding curriculum reform in the 1990s and beyond. That is a message, occasionally explicit and nearly always implicit, throughout the volume.

One particularly notable passage is in the essay by Peter Spotts in which he states, “When I peel back all of the layers of the issues examined in this volume, I come away with a sense that, at its core, undergraduate education in science—be it in agriculture or any other field—must help students know that they are part of a larger community, one that extends beyond the bounds of a particular discipline or even of the sciences as a whole.” While I agree with the basic premise of the statement that students need to gain appreciation for the greater world, I am appalled by the assumption apparent here and elsewhere in the volume that agriculture is synonymous with science, particularly when the context is physical science. Such an assumption demonstrates a misunderstanding of the difference between the many faceted sector known as agriculture with the physical sciences, social sciences, and the various disciplines in the humanities which contribute to that sector. The misconception evident in the view that agriculture is physical science is readily apparent if one were to reflect upon the sage advice and counsel that would likely have come.

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