Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics, 41,2(August 2009):339–345

Doctoring the Afflicted and Demythifying Public Policy

Larry D. Sanders

> "The ultimate test of a set of economic ideas. . . is whether it **illuminates the anxieties** of the time. Does it **explain problems** that people find urgent? Does it bear on the **current criticism** of economic performance? . . . Does it bear upon the **issues of political debate**? For these, though many have always preferred to believe otherwise, do not ignite spontaneously or emerge maliciously from the mouths of agitators to afflict the comfortable."—John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics & the Public Purpose*, 1973

In 1976, I first walked into the Department of Agricultural Economics at New Mexico State University after six years in the U.S. Army and naively interpreting John Kenneth Galbraith's words as a call to devote myself to working on problems that really mattered to real people. But I jump ahead of myself.

It is perhaps trite to say that the maturation of both professional careers and personal lives is an evolutionary process. We are, whether in our careers or our personal lives, in a state of becoming.[1] Thus, I choose to respond to this award with a discussion of my state of becoming, among other persona, an economist that both embraces the foundations and skeptically deconstructs them, and honors as well the spirit of academic economic professionalism.

Larry D. Sanders is professor and policy specialist at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

[1] I begin with an editorial apology. A rule of professional writing about which I am strict is that it may be done only in the third person. I have been unable to draft this seminar presentation for my own lifetime achievement award without violating that rule and speaking in the first person.

I thank the Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA) and those associates who initiated this recommendation. My purpose here today is to review factors that shaped and molded me along the winding road of my development, and to reflect on minor and major issues or concerns that have been on my mind lately. In a cursory review of recent years' comments by several Lifetime Achievement Award recipients, I am both humbled and relieved. I am humbled because I see them towering over me professionally. I am relieved because (1) there is a range of responses that give me the excuse of flexibility in formulating my comments, and (2) I can refer readers and audience to their comments if you want lists of what must be done in a successful career, for that is not my purpose herein.

Self-Identification

While I am always delighted and flattered to be introduced as an "agricultural economist" or "economist," I tend to think of myself first as a teacher, then as a writer, then as an economist. How a journalist, soldier, salesman, forest firefighter, high school teacher made the transition to economist is perhaps too circuitous a route to travel in the time I have here, but I will point to some of the signposts along the way.

On the first day of every class I have ever taught[2] I stress my basic philosophy of life: we

[2] Those classes include high school Social Studies and Government, undergraduate Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Introduction to Agricultural and Natural Resource Economics, Agribusiness Marketing and Management, Agricultural Public Policy Issues, Natural Resource Economics, Natural Resource and Environmental Ethics, and graduate level Benefit Cost Analysis.

are here in this life for only two reasons–to learn and to have fun; occasionally, we can do both at the same time; for that to occur regularly in class, students must share responsibility with me, the instructor, to achieve that a goal. I view Extension as another opportunity to teach. I also consider myself a writer. I have loved struggling with the craft of writing ever since grade school. My first professional activity as a writer was as a fledgling reporter for my daily newspaper, the *Carlsbad Current Argus* in New Mexico, and later with the *Laramie Daily Boomerang* in Wyoming. I have viewed my faculty position as an excuse to write for both a professional and public lay audience. It remains a joy and a challenge to communicate effectively in the written word.

I do also consider myself a scientist as economist. My Ph.D. is in economics, rather than agricultural economics. I take as a literal precept for the extension work I do that it must be based on sound scientific research and theory. I bristle, although less these days, at those in the profession who have the very narrow definition of economist as one who conducts cutting-edge research and communicates his/her findings in a short list of so-called "quality" journals. We may speak more about that topic later.

What kind of economist do I label myself as? "Institutional," "resource," and "policy" are the primary adjectives I have attached to my economist role. For much of my career, however, I have happily identified myself as a "public policy" specialist or educator (PPE). More recently, that has evolved to "public issues education" (PIE), pushed by such drivers as Farm Foundation. Jim Hildreth, long-time director of the foundation, became an informal mentor to me, and his passing was a great loss to past, current and future public policy educators. He taught many educators how to strive for demythification of the public policy process as we attempt to more fully inform the public. My favorite statement of Jim's is this:

> The primary function of public policy education and those who choose to engage as public policy educators is to move citizens from "cocksure ignorance" to "thoughtful uncertainty" [with respect to matters of public policy].—R.J. Hildreth[3]

Aside from that great goal, there were a number of other lessons I learned as a member of the National Public Policy Education Committee (NPPEC).[4] These included the concepts of objectivity, that publics are not clientele, to think in alternatives and consequences, not pros and cons, and issues evolution. Names such as Barry Flinchbaugh, Ron Knutson, Verne House, Hal Harris, Warren Trock, Sue Williams, and Jim Novak come to mind as key tutors in this process (I beg forgiveness from those I have overlooked). Also, I probably embraced the PPE role from the beginning because it was so enmeshed in my own desire to put a human face on the work that I do and the problems I attempt to tackle. Hank Wadsworth put this about as succinctly as I have ever heard:

> Public Policy and Issues Education should focus on what makes grown men and women cry.-H. Wadsworth, ECOP Liaison, Purdue University, 1996.[5]

Public Policy Education concepts have made me a strict taskmaster among my peers. I will not dwell on the theory and practice of Public Policy and Issue Education, but an overview of some of these concepts helps describe the nature of my professional philosophy and how this shaped my history.

First Lesson: Apply the Tools but be Objective

Because we land grant university faculty and field staff work for the public and are paid by the taxpayers, I consider it essential that we

---

[3] Jim Hildreth was the long-time director of Farm Foundation. While he made this statement many times over his career, I first heard it at a national meeting in Denver, CO, in 1987.

[4] The NPPEC was for many years actively supported by the Farm Foundation.

[5] Hank Wadsworth, an administrator and agricultural economist at Purdue University, made such a statement several times. I took this quote from his guidance at a meeting while I was on sabbatical in Washington, DC, leading the Managing Change Initiative for USDA-CSREES.

always be objective and never, never, never advocate for a particular perspective or a particular group that has a point of view. An outgrowth of that guideline, often espoused by Hildreth, is that our audiences are the various publics we serve and not clientele groups. "Clientele" connotes individuals and groups with whom a professional has a contractual obligation with expectations of advocacy. I am disappointed to say that it seems that Dr. Hildreth and those of us who consider ourselves his followers have largely failed to convince many of our associates and administrators on this point. Banishing the concept of "pros and cons" and adopting instead "alternatives and consequences" is, in part, another companion of objectivity. You cannot speak of pros and cons without taking a side; what is pro to you may be con to me.[6] On the other hand, identifying alternative solutions to a public policy issue and then evaluating their respective consequences allows the educator to stand at arm's length without taking a side and thus allows the targeted publics to take that information and reach their own conclusions.[7]

Applications of these lessons are at times hard, especially when the issue is an emotional one, near and dear to the heart. Nevertheless, I have found time and again that objectivity is the only way to keep a policy person focused and above the fray.

With the concept of "issue evolution," I have been better able to understand and communicate to the public that every issue tells a story.[8] Understanding a story allows both the educator and the public a better opportunity to find successful solutions to policy problems. Other models from PPE that have proven very useful in my career includes the "Kings and Kingmakers" model, a pyramid of the levels of power and interest in every community and surrounding every public issue past and present.[9]

In addition to my need to put real human faces on the problems I address, I have many faces that have shaped who I am and how I conduct my professional role on both academic and emotional levels—and that emotional touch has often made my own attempts at objectivity even more challenging.

J.D. Fleming was a senior lobbyist for the Oklahoma Farmers Union (OFU) when I arrived in Oklahoma in 1985 to begin my work as an assistant professor for Oklahoma State University. J.D. took me under his wing, briefed me on the issues facing Oklahoma farmers and rural communities, and took me on state capitol and field tours to meet both the "powerful" and the "salt of the earth" elected and appointed decision makers and farmers and ranchers across the state. As long as I understood that OFU had a distinct point of view and maintained my own objectivity, I gained a great education for a public policy educator "wanna-be". Consequently, I was able to meet other lobby group representatives on their terms and develop education programs that were more effective in meeting all public needs, and sooner than I might otherwise have done.

Second Lesson: In Policy be Concise, You Only Have a Page to Get the Point Across

Marietta Yancey was the agricultural aide for one of our Congressmen (Glenn English, D-OK). We managed to develop a great working relationship. I would occasionally call her to get background or inside "scoops" on pending legislation and legislative inaction. She would occasionally call me for my professional input on actions the Congressman was reviewing or considering proposing himself. She also introduced me to the famous bean soup in the U.S. Senate Cafeteria. On a

[6] In my first few months as a public policy specialist at OSU, I issued a newsletter discussing the "pros and cons" of the 1985 farm bill. Basking in the pride of my apparent initiative, I was stung when an associate from Texas A&M called and rightfully dressed me down for the faux pas. Making mistakes is how we learn. It is not unusual for me to need to relearn several times before it sticks.

[7] Variety of sources; this is a more recent source: Carol L. Anderson, ed. *Family and Community Policy: Strategies for Civic Engagement.* Alexandria, Virginia: American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, 2004.

[8] Op cit.; in particular see Chapter 4 of above cited publication, written by C. Sue Miles and this author.

[9] Ibid.

professional level, she taught me that I needed to limit my input to Congressman English and other reps to no more than one page per issue, quite a challenge initially and still occasionally in this complex world.

Ms. Yancey also changed the way I professionally view food safety. She taught me about our professional blindness about the real and perceived problems with so-called safe food. As we sat in the USDA cafeteria one day for lunch, she broke the news that she had breast cancer, probably incurable. Then, she explained that, even in this cafeteria within the building of the very institution to which we looked for providing a safe food supply, her doctor had said she could eat nothing of what it had to offer. While it was partly a general restriction on food that might adversely interact with her disease and treatments, it was also an indictment on the apparent lack of recognition of ubiquitous adulteration of food with what USDA would term "safe" chemicals. When she lost her battle with cancer a year later, it was not only a personal loss because she had become a good friend; it was also a testament to the need for more scientific interaction between the medical profession and the agricultural sector.

Third Lesson: Sometimes, No Matter How Well You are Trained, It Will Fail You

Another human face that affected me deeply is one I often bring into the classroom when explaining to students the expectations of the public on our profession. During a professional trip to Russia to teach a graduate course and consult with the Ministry of Agriculture, I was taken on a field tour with a group of American associates. While on a visit to a new private farm that resulted from the breakup of a state farm, the husband and wife owners introduced us to an eldery worker who had been a field hand on the state farm. I will call her the "Russian Babushka". After it had been explained that she had stayed in former state housing on the farm and occasionally worked for the new owners, they said she existed on the equivalent of a state pension of about $2 to $3 a month. Then, they told her, in a general way, who we were. A toothy grin burst on the Babushka's face and she excitedly said "Ah, you are Americans! You can tell me and my friends how we can now survive with the end of the Soviet Union and our state farms." She was enthusiastic and sincere and burst into tears in anticipation of our "wisdom", as if she had been awaiting a miracle. Needless to say, I have never felt more at a loss in my ability to measure up to my professional goal of helping real people solve real problems.

Fourth Lesson: Don't Forget There are Real People Behind Our Theory

Other faces that have and continue affect me deeply include those of my family—wife, daughter, granddaughters, parents. I was never able to fully explain to my dad what I really did, but it was not for lack of trying nor was it lack of intelligence on his part (he was a very smart person). Many of us have shared anecdotes over the years about this point. Seeing my family line extended through my granddaughters put a whole new emphasis on the lessons of "future generations" and "dynamic efficiency" I teach in natural resource economics.

Another face that has been significant is the face of hunger—a generic poster of starving children that drives me to elevate my passion for making a point when I teach the lesson on world hunger. Believing the statistics that every minute of every day 17–25 humans die of hunger and hunger-related diseases, and 7–20 of those are children, I find it a challenge to maintain objectivity on this subject.[10] My generation, as I tell my students, had high hopes to solve world hunger by the end of the 20th century. Clearly, my generation has failed. It is up to the current generation of students to solve this problem. I divide the class into a proportional representation of the world, then pass out proportional plates of food, showing dramatically who the haves and have-nots are. How can this

[10] Sources vary on exact numbers and how "hunger-related diseases" are defined. Check data provided by World Food Day programs, the UN and FAO. For example: UN-World Food Program: http://www.wfp.org, http://ww.fao.org; Vallee, J. "Conflicting global hunger numbers", message at: http://developmentgateway.org.

be? Is it okay? Is it ethical? What are they the students willing to do?

The natural resource and environmental stress that is part of this world hunger story fits very well into classroom discussions. Hamm has noted the growing stress on land, water, energy, pollution, and health.[11] Copeland has also summarized these stark issues, bringing together concerns about population growth, water shortages, and ethics.[12] He suggested that, by 2025, water scarcity may cause global food crop losses equivalent to the entire U.S. crop of 350 million metric tons. If there is anything positive in my class discussion, it is that world hunger is an economic problem. The tools and skills we provide in the education process can be used as part of complex solutions. Economic development is the key and education is the foundation for that development. How economic development is defined and implemented, how sensitivity to social and cultural institutions is built into the process, who is making the decisions, and how equitable is distribution are among the great challenges in achieving success. So, there is hope, if qualified, imparted at the conclusion of my classroom lecture.

Final Lesson: Life Sometimes Provides Us Harsh but Useful Lessons to Enhance Our Work

Another face that haunts me daily is the face of war. My war was Vietnam. Those who know me well know this about me and I credit them with being there for me with hugs and nonjudgmental words of comfort when I need them. War, whether justified or not, is man's inhumanity to man (generic man, not gender). It took me years to understand that survival in combat requires temporary insanity. Now, here we have another generation of brave Americans returning with the same stress. This is a very discomforting subject for me. Each year on or near Veteran's Day, I devote the last part of class to tell the students my story and to keep the hope alive that the 60,000 or so who died in Vietnam did not do so in vain. A new generation will continue this tragic ritual, experiencing and hopefully surviving their own delayed stress from the current wars. I did use this experience to my advantage early in my career as a graduate student at Colorado State. A new faculty member, also a Vietnam vet, worked with me to develop a new program in managing stress in the farm crisis of the early 1980s. The "aha" moment was when we realized that the stress we were dealing with from our war experiences was the same stress that farm families, ag bankers, agribusiness managers, and even rural pastors were experiencing, albeit from different causes. The stages of denial, anger, frustration, and inability to act were the same manifestations of distress, whether of war veterans or farm families in financial crisis.

Concerns

In spite of concerns, I am basically an optimist, and I love what I do. Thus, I am reluctant to say much about some of my pet concerns related to our profession—but I also cannot pass up the opportunity. So, here's a brief list of "what's been buggin' me lately".

1. There seems to be a growing lack of appreciation for professional networking, especially among administrators.
2. There seems to be a growing lack of appreciation for professional service, especially among junior faculty.
3. I am concerned about grant-driven programs eroding our commitment to the people of our respective states.
4. I am concerned that the trend of faculty needing to publish in journals, and selected journals at that, is also eroding our commitment to the people of our respective states.
5. There seems to be a growing lack of appreciation for the concept of faculty-shared governance, especially among junior faculty and administrators and university regents.

---

[11] M. Hamm. "Integrating Local and Global Food Systems." National Public Policy Education Conference, St. Louis, September 2004.

[12] John Copeland. "Global Water Outlook 2025: Averting an Impending Crisis." National Public Policy Education Conference, Fayetteville, AR, 2006.

6. The silly, sometimes strident, myopic adherence to the concepts of free and perfect markets by many in our discipline is killing us, and will lead to our irrelevance.

I could go on, but I will stop the list there. I can, however, clarify this short list.

1. *The growing lack of appreciation for professional networking, especially among administrators*. My career success in helping my various publics solve problems was improved and hastened because of attendance at regional and national peer committees and meetings where I had a chance to see what and how others were addressing the same problems. There was less reinventing the wheel and more improving the efficiency of the wheel by this cross-fertilization of like minds. Budgets, administrator shortsightedness, and misguided home department promotion standards have already weakened a good system, and I see no indication that it will get better.
2. *The growing lack of appreciation for professional service, especially among junior faculty.* It takes a while to understand how and why the "system" works as it does and does not. Here, junior faculty attempts to fly solo will have adverse consequences long past my time. If universities primarily or only reward junior faculty for research grants and publications, we are sending the message that service and faculty governance is not important or valued. Then, we wonder when enrollment and scholarship funds start to decline, when administrators and regents usurp more of the governance role (and come up with things such as post-tenure review), when there is a marked decline in number and quality of staff, when state and federal budgets decline. There is a direct correlation between service and erosion such as this.
3. *Grant-driven programs eroding our commitment to the people of our respective states.* I have done relatively well with joint grants. I understand they are an important component of our overall budgets. However, there is no doubt that they focus resources on specific issues that may not be as important to the people of our states, and necessarily reduce attention to those problems and issues that may be more important. I also understand that to the extent there is a reduction of budget from state and federal sources, this trend may be beyond our control.
4. *The trend to require publication in journals, and selected journals at that, eroding our commitment to the people of our respective states*. As noted earlier, I consider myself a scientist and a proponent of the scientific method. A portion of that is to publish peer-reviewed articles. My quarrel is both with the seeming over-emphasis on journal publication, and with the over-emphasis on the count and not on the topics or quality. When an administrator brags about a junior faculty member with a prolific record of publication, he/she typically is looking at the numbers. How many of us support the recognition that one well-written, timely, people-and-problem-solving-focused article or presentation is worth as much or more than several narrowly-focused, people-and-problem-solving-irrelevant, but otherwise technically elegant journal articles? Tenure, promotion, retention, pay raises, and recommendations for chair positions seldom use such a filter. I understand and respect those who rationalize the counter-arguments and disagree strongly with my interpretation of relevance. Comparative and competitive advantage are concepts we need to apply to our professional academic lives. As long as you have an advantage in one or more of the professionally-essential roles—research, writing, teaching, extending, advising and recruiting, etc.—you get rewarded with some level of equivalence and equity. However, this is wishful thinking.
5. *A growing lack of appreciation for the concept of faculty-shared governance, especially among junior faculty and administrators and university regents.* While this may not be as noticeable within many of our departments, it is becoming increasingly pervasive at the university level. At my own institution, there is a rich history and tradition of faculty-shared governance. It seemed to be generally holding its own until the administrative leadership changed a few years ago. This, coupled with key changes on the board of regents, have

brought about an apparent diminishment of the power of the university faculty council. Sadly, there has been little outcry from the community of faculty. Whether too busy, or too worn down, or too new, most faculty do not want to be bothered with the responsibility of shared governance. In conversation with faculty at other universities, this is not a unique problem. Sounds a lot like how about half of the public decides that voting isn't worth the time or effort, doesn't it?

6. *The silly, sometimes strident, myopic adherence to the concepts of free and perfect markets by many in our discipline is killing us, and will lead to our irrelevance*. I was less certain about even noting this concern in this venue. It may be perceived as heretical and have me labeled as an agnostic or atheist with respect to the basic underpinnings of our discipline. I have seen some evolution in this behavior. As I left grad school, most mainstream mentors did not want to discuss much about the myth and fiction of free markets. Over the past decade or so, more in the discipline seem to take it as a given that markets are not free, but most still treat it as a goal to aspire to. In the evolution of educating ourselves on the theory of economics, the recognition of what Schumpeter called the "destructive gales" of competition remains stunted or ignored.[13] Denial is pervasive, in spite of the occasional Krugman.[14] Will the demise of the free marketeers with the recent global economic meltdown lead to a renaissance of exploration and acceptance that could result in more relevant work on behalf of our various publics? I am not hopeful.

Concluding Thoughts

Okay, I have been a bit dismal in reviewing my own evolution. I may have been too forthright or downright nasty in clarifying some of my concerns. Having arrived here, understand that I have been blessed in both my personal and professional life. I am proud of the work I have done. My self-evaluation, over-simplified, is to periodically consider if I am helping the people of my state, if I am contributing to the public good of the community of peers, if I am learning and having fun and help my students in and out of class to do the same.

I often fall short of those goals, but redouble my efforts to be successful by those standards. Occasionally, I recall what an anonymous source said was the basic rule of marketing: "Delight the customer." But, I also recognize that increasing the discomfort of the targeted audience is sometimes what is needed. Here, I try to walk the tightrope between contributing to healthy stress and minimizing unhealthy distress, both in the audience and in myself. Without the support of my family, my secretaries, and department, I would not be here today.

Final-Final Lesson: Have Fun—Sometimes a Little Discomfort May Contribute to Learning

[13] J. Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* 5th ed. New York: Harper, 1976.

[14] Noted economist Paul Krugman. See any of his numerous books on the economy or read several of his columns in *The New York Times*.