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Morale and Faculty Development in Agricultural Economics: Discussion

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Dr. Purcell's observations on faculty success within agricultural economics deal primarily with comparative advantage and respect for diversity. His arguments are similar in nature to Houck's AAAE presidential address of 1992. I would suggest that someone interested in this topic read Ladd, Skees, McDowell, Hite, Bonnen, Paarlberg, Debertin, and Bromely for further context.

A crucial contribution of Purcell is his defense of the traditional linkages (clientele) of agricultural economists. As an assistant professor speaking to this body I feel a little like Luke Skywalker. To confront and succeed in the future I must somehow (re)discover my past. The reality of the past is that without the Morrill, Hatch, and Smith-Lever Acts none of us would be sitting here today. Furthermore, it is the uncertainty that surrounds these historical acts that threatens us today. So it is important that we listen carefully to Purcell and his talk of constituency, clientele, and credibility. But it is also (most) important that we remember our university mission.

What does it mean to be a university professor? Pelikan defines a university to include the following: advancement of knowledge through research; extension of knowledge through teaching; professional training that includes both knowledge and skill; preservation of knowledge in libraries; and diffusion of knowledge through scholarly publication. Knowledge, Knowledge, Knowledge. Pursuing, extending, preserving, and diffusing knowledge. It sounds hauntingly similar to an "ivory tower." As Purcell pleads for balance, there

should also be a plea for preserving the ivory tower. For without that component of a university the dissolution to a training, technical, and consulting enterprise is inevitable. In fact, Purcell implicitly warns against this dissolution.

Another front to address in this morale and development discussion is the evolution of our profession. The powerful trend is towards renaming ourselves applied economists. Thus we have progressed from farm to agricultural to applied. But as a colleague of mine explained, much of the economic literature also uses some application to clarify or approach some problem. Therefore if economists are becoming more like us and we are becoming more like economists where does that leave us--Southern Economic Association. Uh-oh. One already exists. How about the American Economic Association? Uh-oh. One already exists. Once again this brings us back to comparative advantage. Purcell believes our comparative advantage is as a liaison from the private or public arena to the disciplinary arena of analytical economics. Notice the word agriculture has not been used. The most recent faculty in agricultural economics have little allegiance to traditional agriculture. They consider themselves applied economists. Why wouldn't they? Emory Castle recently revealed that as early as 1973 discussion at the highest agricultural economic leadership levels centered around a perspective and name change from agricultural to applied. It should not then be surprising that most of us today consider ourselves applied economists. As usual, the institutional lag verifies the reality of change. Faculty development and morale are individual realities that are difficult

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to measure in the aggregate. Nevertheless, the beauty of university life is contingent on freedom to intellectually grow and develop. This includes risk since failure is possible and probable.

Dr. Purcell, in a 1989 teaching workshop in Baton Rouge, warned those present that one faces a decision when entering an academic career path. That decision concerns commitment and consequences. For those committed to undergraduate teaching, the consequences are less publications, prestige, and income. Today, he reminds us that marginal principals apply equally to the various functions of a university position.

One question to end the discussion is "Why are publications the measure of success at a research institution?" I will come right out and say publications are an appropriate measure of success. The rationale for this answer is that diffusion of knowledge can come only after advancement, extension, or application. And, the heart of a

university is the pursuit of knowledge. It is the spoke in the center of the wheel. A university faculty that loses their passion for the pursuit of knowledge will deteriorate into no more than a technical training school. Furthermore, it is the noblest goal of university faculty to instill this passion into our students (undergraduate, graduate, and adult). Many of the most troubling signs of our society (and our profession) rotate on a lack of appreciation for diversity and knowledge. Constraints force society to choose activities which are valued highest. The activities of a research university are the lodestone of a dynamic and healthy economy and government. I believe the challenge that confronts faculty today is to teach the methodology and value of research. The ability to conduct research is a crucial ingredient to successful careers and citizenship. We have a comparative advantage and must realize that sometimes we will be the memory of a university professor. I would hope that memory would include a passion for the pursuit of knowledge.

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