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Research in Agricultural Economics -- Is Anyone Listening? Discussion

James W. Richardson *

The common thread running through these three papers is the quest for relevance in agricultural economics. Zilberman (DZ) is looking for acceptance and relevance in interdisciplinary research, Robison and Colyer (R&C) are looking for relevance in the professional journals, and Skees (JS) tells us how we can do relevant economic research for the policy process. I will discuss each paper in turn and then try to draw a relevant conclusion.

Interdisciplinary Collaborative Efforts

In his paper, DZ recounts many of the benefits and pitfalls of interdisciplinary collaborative research. Although the paper is written from a personal perspective, its contents can be generalized to an economic model of interdisciplinary research. DZ states that many problems remain within distinct disciplines "until some sort of constraint arises." Economists are called in when financial constraints or regulations make a pure discipline-oriented system operate sub-optimally. His examples relate to water and water markets, however, this applies for any system.

Based on DZ's paper, I propose the following model for explaining the role of economists in interdisciplinary research:

$$Y = f(C, L, E, R)$$

where:

Y is output of a disciplinary system,
C is capital in the production process,
L is labor for the production process,

E is economic analyses of the system,
R is exogenous regulations of the system.

In a pure disciplinary system, there is no perceived need for economic analysis (E) to achieve the desired level of output (Y), given no exogenous regulations, restrictions, or constraints (R). For example, plant scientists maximize production without regard for prices and other conditions economists hold dear. An alternative view of Y in a pure disciplinary system is that the economists have already been involved, developed their models for the existing level of R, and turned over the day-to-day management of the system to the disciplinary scientists. In either case, the coefficient for E in a pure disciplinary system is zero. As a result, the demand for economists (MVP) by the discipline is zero.

As new regulations are put in place or existing regulations are made more restrictive, the coefficient of E in Y increases and thus the MVP for economists in interdisciplinary research increases. For example, pesticide restrictions and concerns in the 1960s led to economists working with entomologists in interdisciplinary teams. The increase in the demand for economists to do interdisciplinary research, however, does not automatically result in economists being involved in the discipline. This is because the MVP for an economist is often times less than the cost of an economist (MFC).

DZ explains, through examples, that economists (E) are not homogenous and infinitely divisible when it comes to interdisciplinary research. This leads me to conclude that there are two means

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for increasing the number of economists involved in interdisciplinary research, namely:

- Increase the number of economists trained in the interpersonal and communicative skills DZ outlines, thus reducing the MFC of hiring an economist, and/or
- Increase the restrictiveness of regulations (R) that reduce Y so the coefficient on E increases the MVP of economists above their MFC.

The trend is for policy makers to devise and pass more restrictive regulations on the use of scarce resources, e.g., Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Coastal Zone Management Act, FIFRA, and Endangered Species Act. Given this rather simple model for explaining the demand for economists in interdisciplinary research, I conclude that the demand for agricultural economists in interdisciplinary research will continue to grow. The outlook then is quite good for agricultural economists who have or can obtain the skills DZ indicates are needed to do research with other disciplines. If we are to remain relevant in a changing job market, we, as a discipline, must take note of these changes and prepare our students for the future.

Relevance of Professional Journals

In their paper, R&C review the relevance of our professional journals from the perspective of former editors for the *RAE*. They conclude that the journals have lost their relevance and only serve to "certify author's professional credibility" for promotion and tenure, salary adjustments, and grants and contracts. Although we may agree with R&C that the journals only certify credibility, this is an important role for the journals; or don't you want pay raises, promotions, and grants?

As a profession, we must decide what we want from our professional journals. Do we want journals that communicate to all facets of our clientele or do we want journals that certify author's professional credibility? We can no longer sit idly

by and blame the editors for the current state of our journals. R&C point out the obvious, that "the editors are limited to what they publish by the articles that are submitted for review." R&C solicited applied economics articles that fit somewhere between the *AJAE* and *Choices* but received primarily *AJAE*-type articles. These methodology-based articles were then reviewed by *AJAE* authors/reviewers who used the same criteria they use when reviewing for the *AJAE*, i.e., pull the ladder up. The result was a new journal that serves to grant credibility to researchers seeking promotion and tenure, pay adjustments, and grants.

It appears that the blame for the sad state of our journals rests with us -- the authors and the reviewers. I think there is a need for three types of journals:

- The heavyweights, such as the *AJAE*, are needed to grant credibility by offering an opportunity to expand the frontiers of knowledge.
- A class of mid-weight journals is needed to report applied research results to business managers, consultants, extension specialists, researchers, and interdisciplinary scientists, to name a few. The *Journal of Production Agriculture* fits this category better than our disappearing regional journals. But, the delay in the review/publication process is too long to be effective for a policymaker.
- A class of lightweight periodicals, such as *Choices*, is needed to report results to decision makers and rent seeking groups. This class of journals must address issues in a timely fashion or it, too, will become irrelevant for the policy process.

For a three-class journal system to succeed, it will take a lot of trust. Authors will have to trust

the editors who call for applied research articles. (It takes more time to write these articles so authors will have to be convinced to invest the additional time.) Reviewers will have to trust the editors who say they want to publish applied articles that communicate to the middle group or to the decision maker/rent seeker group. We, the reviewers, need to review articles with an eye toward the intended audience. Not all journals are intended to be the *AJAE* or all journal articles to apply to the *AJAE* target audience. Editors will have to trust that there is a market (readership) for their journal. Ultimately, promotion and tenure committees will have to recommend promotion based on a balanced portfolio of quality publications in more than one class of journals. Unless the promotion and tenure system recognizes the benefits of publishing in all three types of journals, the system is doomed.

I agree with R&C that it is time to change our professional journals in the search of relevance, particularly in this era of increased budget constraints and accountability. We must start on the difficult road now while we still have a critical mass of applied economists to support a multiple journal system. A three-tier journal system is not going to be easy to put in place, but until it is operational, the editors should implement R&C's recommendations that English be used as the common language and that the authors be required to write executive summaries describing the relevance of each article.

Research in Public Policy

In his paper, JS argues that policy economists can make a difference in the political process through economic research. JS makes several recommendations for agricultural economists who want to do policy analysis research. I would like to focus my discussion on two of JS's recommendations; namely, objectivity and timeliness.

I agree with JS that Land Grant System (LGS) agricultural economists cannot and should not become involved in the *promotion* of any policy. To be a promoter or advocate for a research study is to be a promoter of a policy alternative. Promotion of a policy alternative should be left to those rent seekers who have something to gain or

lose from the policy. For economists in the LGS, who do not directly benefit or lose rents from a policy, to promote a solution is to force their utility function on others. This is an error we are warned against in our introductory economics courses (and should be warned again during our graduate methodology courses) but some economists have ignored this warning in the past.

The major problem associated with promoting a policy research analysis is the loss of professional credibility. Once you promote a policy, you become branded with that particular policy alternative for the rest of your career. Proponents of the policy will tout all of your future work while opponents will discount all future research as just further justification of your original position. Policy analysts who have had long and productive careers in the LGS have not fallen into the trap of promoting their research or a particular policy. Those economists who become advocates for particular policies generally leave the LGS and are consultants for the rent seeking groups that their research aligned them with.

As JS indicates, successful LGS policy analysts will continue to adhere to the traditional "positive" research/extension policy analysis paradigm of :

issues → *alternatives* → *consequences*

without advocacy. JS suggests that this paradigm be extended to include a final step of → *preferences*. He argues that part of our role as economists should be in the "articulation of alternative performance criteria." As long as this is done without helping the decision maker rank policy alternatives, I think this could be an improvement to the policy analysis paradigm.

Based on our experience in the Agricultural and Food Policy Center, there are other improvements that should be made to the traditional policy analysis paradigm of *issues* → *alternatives* → *consequences*. These improvements are designed to increase the timeliness of policy analyses in an effort to improve the relevance of policy analyses.

- LGS policy analysts can identify policy issues in advance of their

becoming political issues. This can be done through discussions with congressional committee staffers, agency economists, and representatives of the rent seekers. This issue identification process allows policy analysts time to develop models and data sets necessary for analyses in a calmer atmosphere before the political pressure takes over.

- Politically feasible policy alternatives (a subset of possible alternatives) that merit the use of limited resources for policy analysis can be identified in group meetings of committee staffers, agency economists, and representatives of the rent seeking groups. These focus groups serve as the first focal point for reporting the results of policy analyses and as formal review panels. To be of use to these groups, policy analyses must, of course, be provided on a timely basis -- before the issue becomes politically charged.
- Consequences of alternative policies must be presented without ranking and multiple criteria must be presented so the favorite criteria for each rent seeking group is clearly presented in simple English, as DZ suggests. The results of policy analyses are presented to all interested parties in exactly the same format and at the same time. Promotion of the research results is left up to the decision makers and the rent seekers. The sign of a good policy analysis is one which is used effectively by both the opponents and the proponents of the issue.

The issue of timeliness is of utmost importance. An analysis of a set of policy

alternatives is of no use to anyone if it is not available during the decision time frame. The traditional answer to a request for a study of ". . . give me two years and funding for a graduate student," is not timely. It is entirely possible that it may take three years of work (data collecting, model building, and analysis) to be in a position to respond to a request with a deadline of one week. This short-turnaround policy analysis requires a long-term commitment of the LGS economist (or group) to do relevant/timely policy analyses.

One justification for supporting policy analysts in the LGS has been that we provide relevant, unbiased policy analyses of use to decision makers. A corollary is that LGS policy analysts make economic research results available to all groups without regard for their financial resources or political preferences. If LGS economists fall into the trap of advocating policy analyses with indications of perceived societal preferences, the perception of our providing unbiased research available to all groups will be lost and, of greater concern, a major justification for our existence will be lost.

Summary

The trend toward more regulations on agriculture's use of natural resources will increase the demand for agricultural economists in interdisciplinary and policy research. This increased demand for economic analysis should be viewed as an opportunity to become more relevant by serving society. By adhering to the traditional policy analysis paradigm of *issues* → *alternatives* → *consequences*, LGS economists can make meaningful contributions to the decision-making process and continue to justify their role in the LGS. The keys to success in this era will be providing unbiased and timely research that is relevant to current policy issues.

Changes in our professional journals will be necessary to meet the challenges of this new era of policy analysis and accountability. New journals which present applied research results that are useful to interdisciplinary research teams and to decision makers will be in demand. Timeliness in

the publication of research results alone may force researchers to develop other outlets for their research.

In conclusion, yes, there is someone listening to what agricultural economists have to

say. To justify society's future support of the LGS, we must strive to provide understandable analyses of the consequences of alternative policy options on a timely basis.