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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS OF A PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY

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As outgoing President of the AAEA I hold two somewhat contradictory emotions concerning my year in office. The first can be stated simply--thank God it is about to end! The other is a sense of excitement deriving from opportunities of the Association to better serve its members and society. On the assumption that you are not particularly interested in my frustrations in operating a volunteer organization and coping with the insidious nature of the U.S. Postal Service I shall limit my remarks to what I perceive as opportunities of the AAEA and regional associations to better serve their members and society.

Purposes and Functions

The Constitution of the AAEA states the Association's purpose is "...to further the development of systematic knowledge of agricultural economics. As a professional organization, the Association shall pursue this object by facilitating scientific research, instruction, publications, meetings and other activities designed to advance and disseminate knowledge in agricultural economics. The Association shall encourage freedom of economic discussion and shall not commit its members to any position on economic policy issues."

In general, professional societies provide five principal types of services:

- (1) Information: journal, bibliographic, archival, data bank, news, reference books.

- (2) Educational: seminars, conferences, syllabic services, texts and workbooks, teaching guidelines and review.
- (3) Employment: job identification and placement, graduate student guidance, foreign assignments, assessment of employment needs and conditions, tenure, etc.
- (4) Fraternal: insurance, tours, honors, social events, special purchasing.
- (5) Lobbying: impacting institutional and/or public policy for the benefit of society members and perceived client groups of the society.

To some degree the AAEA and regional associations provide each of those services although the first three receive the major emphasis with the information service being clearly dominant. Traditionally, most of the services have been in the nature public services, that is, they are available to members and nonmembers alike. Actions by the AAEA Board during the past year to discriminate in pricing of some services between members and nonmembers and to limit participation by nonmembers in some functions of the Association are steps in the direction of developing member-selective services. The extent and manner in which the Association might be transformed further to a member-selective organization is a major policy issue for the future.

On the Nature of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Economists

I believe there is need and opportunity for the American and regional associations to enlarge the scope and improve the quality of each of the five types of services just mentioned, particularly information and educational services.

Before turning to those needs and opportunities a further word on the purposes of such associations. The AAEA constitution makes clear that the prime purpose of the Association is that of advancing the scientific, scholarly contents of the discipline or profession of agricultural economics. In that respect the Association has purposes internal to the profession.

But that Constitution also gives the Association, by my interpretation, an externally-centered purpose--facilitating dissemination of knowledge in agricultural economics. Since agricultural economics is an applied branch of economics and because the great majority of those who are members of the Association are publicly funded and therefore have obligation to serve the public interest it follows that the profession and thereby the Association must be externally-oriented to serve that interest. Society legitimizes and supports

the profession and on the basis of perceptions of its performance determines whether the profession survives in the long run. The point of this circumlocution is simply that the American and regional associations have important purposes to serve in relating the profession to society and the public interest. Their agenda and their functions should be externally as well as internally oriented.

But why are American and regional associations needed to achieve those purposes? Three reasons come to mind.

First, is the structure and organization of agricultural economic institutions. The descriptors which come to mind are: diffused, pluralistic, small-scale. In sum across the 50 land grant universities, the public and private non-land grant universities, the private sector and the Federal and State governments the personnel and financial resources devoted to agricultural economics are substantial. But within each, the resources relative to other disciplines usually are small. Not unlike the individual firm in a state of pure competition the individual agricultural economics department or agency finds its ability to influence its terms of trade (e.g. personnel and financial allotments) to be weak even in its local market but particularly in the larger state and national markets (state and national legislatures, granting agencies, etc.). Not unlike our prescriptions for enhancement of market power in agriculture we might consider regional and national professional associations as counterparts to cooperatives, marketing agreements, holding companies, consortia, etc. in some markets for resources for agricultural economic research, instruction and extension. Although I do not wish to apply this analogy too fully it illustrates my point--professional associations might be organized and perform in ways to better or more fully serve the joint interests of its constituent parts than results from the sum of uncoordinated actions by individual components of the system. Examples would include certain professional certification functions, development and presentation of viewpoints with respect to research priorities and public policy issues.

Second, is the nature of that increasingly broad and amorphous field or discipline of study referred to as agricultural economics. The principal descriptors here are diversity and specialization. The latest AAEE Handbook/Directory lists 14 major fields of specialization or interest and 102 subfields as a basis for classifying what agricultural economists do or, at least, say they do. I have never felt that explaining agricultural economics by saying it is what agricultural economists do was a particularly helpful definition of the field. The above statistics support that observation. The major point I wish to make from these data is that we have over time tended to divide and subdivide into smaller and smaller subdisciplinary fields. It should come as no surprise that we sometimes seem to speak more in a babel of tongues or not at all than with clear, unified

positions. A major question to which I shall return is that of how our professional societies should organize and what types of services should be undertaken to serve the diverse interests of those who identify with the field of agricultural economics.

A third feature of the environment in which we work relates to the changing nature of agriculture. As I said at Penn State a year ago a basic feature of that setting is agriculture's growing social, economic and political interdependence. The upshot of that circumstance is to make it increasingly difficult to analyze and understand agriculture except as an integral part of national and world economic, social and political systems. I argued that the complexities and interdependencies of our society require of agricultural economists a more holistic, integral view of agriculture and public policies than is evident in our current agenda. I suggested that we should broaden our professional perspectives, cultivate new clientele and professional alliances, recast and reorder our agenda, and experiment with modified and new institutional arrangements to better address emerging public policy issues and better serve the public interest concerning food and agriculture. I then went on to suggest initiatives which might be undertaken by the AAEA, as an institution which spans, or is capable of spanning the whole profession. Those recommendations were predicated upon a catalytic role which the AAEA might play in better focusing our resources on important public policy issues and if you will, providing some of the "glue" needed to bridge across the subdisciplines or agricultural economics or between agricultural economics and other disciplines.

In brief, the focii which are our "raison d'etre"--food, agriculture, resources and communities--have become increasingly complex and interdependent with larger national and international economic, social and political systems. Our priorities and programs need reevaluation in light of those realities. To deal with the complex, interdependent issues related to food, agriculture, resources and communities we have appropriately broadened the scope of our inquiries, developed and applied empirical techniques of analysis but in so doing have become more specialized within the profession. But specialization can be a handicap to dealing with interdependencies unless mechanisms and institutions exist for integrating the specialized parts. We have difficulties in "getting our act together" as a result of our subdisciplinary specialization and in part because of the diffused, pluralistic, small scale institutions in which we work. I believe our professional associations should do more as catalytic, integrating institutions to facilitate "...scientific research, instruction, publications, meetings ... to advance and disseminate knowledge in agricultural economics ... (and) encourage freedom of economic discussion" within the profession and between the profession of agricultural economics, other professions and the general public.

Needs and Opportunities for Improved Services

Now, let me turn to discussion of more specific needs and opportunities for AAEA and regional association services, particularly information and educational services.

Two committees are exploring opportunities for enlargement and improvement of AAEA information (publication) services. Neither has yet reached a stage in its deliberations where it is prepared to make specific recommendations for modification of existing services to the Executive Board. The thoughts which follow on that subject, are drawn principally from the Professional Activities Committee. They must be considered preliminary and for purposes of encouraging discussion.

The design of a disciplinary information system must take into account not only the content of articles but structure of the organization, the variety of needs of the profession and the public it seeks to serve, and financial resources available. To serve the AAEA adequately, an information system must touch many aspects of the organization--education, policy development, membership expansion, etc. To strengthen the AAEA, the information system probably should feature at least some private goods (i.e., available exclusively, or at lower cost, to members).

Some possible characteristics of such an information system might be:

1. A monthly journal of summary articles, limited, say, to a single printed page. The articles in essence would be carefully and attractively written abstracts with quality comparable to Chemical Abstracts, Science, or Scientific American.
2. The scope of the journal should include all applied economics. To adequately serve the entire field the editorial function might be distributed among several special interest group editors. Marine, forest and mineral economics, rural development, consumer economics are examples of groups now served only marginally, but which could be treated as specialities within a larger federation of subdisciplines.
3. Full text articles could be available in a hard copy journal with microfilm-microfiche available from central library or libraries. Greater flexibility in length and format is permitted if uniformity and size of journal is flexible. Automatic classification and incorporation into the on-line bibliography of agricultural (or applied) economics could be provided. Full text charges could be

discriminantly priced between members and nonmembers. The National Technical Information Service, for example, provides a similar-type service.

4. The paperback book format of the current Journal would be reserved for special issues dedicated to a particular topic and to proceedings of meetings of AAEA. One result is that printing and distribution can be more closely related to the real demand for a specialized topic (members of a particular specialty, for example). Members would feel less as if they were purchasing a large amount of paper in which they had no interest.
5. Advertising could be incorporated into the monthly journal of abstracts because (1) readership would be expanded and (2) more specialties could be served. Advertising and an expanded readership would help finance additional editorial services.
6. Expanded format would permit specialists (1) to be more aware of, and understand, what is going on in related sub-disciplines; (2) get a more complete summary of what is taking place in the subdiscipline.

The present tendency to create small splinter specialty journals, while still serving the legitimization and information functions of a journal does not provide a satisfactory perspective of all applied economics.

With respect to educational services the principal activity of the Association is now the conduct of an annual meeting and participation in the annual meeting of the Allied Social Science Association. I believe the Association should be much more proactive with respect to development and provision of such services. Specifically, I believe it appropriate for the Association to sponsor seminars, workshops, symposia, forums which are oriented to the professional needs of subdisciplines and interest groups which comprise the membership. These educational activities could take on emphasis in methodology, problem and issue identification, review and critique of research proposals or research in progress, research, extension or curricula planning, etc. A particular emphasis of these activities might be that of including interdisciplinary interests.

I believe the Association could appropriately initiate dialogue on major economic policy issues related to food, agriculture, resources and communities. The method of stimulating such dialogue could include sponsorship of workshops, symposia, etc., commissioning or inviting papers focused on specific economic policy issues or possibly the taping of discussion, lectures, or debates focused on policy issues.

Such tapes might be distributed for purposes of classroom instruction, educational television, extension programs, and public interest groups.

On a few occasions we have undertaken such ventures. An excellent example of the activity I have in mind is the invited papers "Thirteen Variations of a Theme" undertaken while Harold Breimyer was President of the Association a few years ago. On a few occasions we have joined in sponsorship of conferences but in most cases we have played a very limited role in program planning, execution, or evaluation. Generally, our role has been passive; I believe we should be much more proactive in this respect.

Would it not be appropriate for AAEEA to sponsor balanced dialogue, written and/or oral, on policy alternatives, economic issues concerning farm price and income programs? Energy, land use, international trade and a variety of food policy issues are other candidates for such dialogue. Many such activities could be conducted without large dollar outlays--there might even be money available from public or foundation sources for such activities. Some will complain that such activities would bring us in violation of our constitution--there should be no commitment to positions on economic policy issues. That need not be so. Surely we can distinguish between advocacy and balanced exposition of policy options and their implications. Furthermore the AAEEA constitution does say that a purpose is that of furthering "freedom of economic discussion." I cannot believe that the constitution intends that we be "eunuchs" with respect to the important economic issues of our times.

In the interest of conserving time I will not discuss opportunities for improved fraternal and employment services. I will touch briefly on what I labeled "lobbying functions." Some will find the term to be bothersome. I do not imply political or legislative lobbying in the sense usually employed but rather, concerted effort within in the scientific community to articulate our goals, priorities, and resource needs as scholars, as a discipline, as researchers, teachers, and extension economists.

Generally, I have found the social sciences including agricultural economics to be relatively inarticulate in such matters. For example in the national and regional research planning process I continue to be frustrated by our lack of cohesion in expressing social science priorities in competition with agronomists, geneticists, entomologists, animal scientists, etc. As we move toward allocation of a larger share of the national research budget on the basis of competitive grants we could well find ourselves in positions of competitive disadvantage relative to other disciplines unless we are better able to enunciate the nature of socio-economic problems and our professional goals and

priorities. I believe the AAEA and the regional associations have a responsibility and a role to play in articulation of such issues, goals, and priorities.

Organizational Strategies

Finally, some brief comments on organizational matters related to the American and regional associations. Three organization strategies come to mind.

One strategy would be to define the profession of agricultural economics very narrowly and traditionally, draw our subject matter curtains around us, sharply focus our services to remaining members and go about our business. This strikes me as a "head-in-the-sand" or "self-destruct" strategy. An alternative is that of encouraging formation of subdisciplinary and perhaps additional regional associations and convert the AAEA to a "holding company" to provide only essential, common services (record keeping, communication, etc.) required by the member associations. A third strategy, one which I deem feasible and preferable at this time, is that of retaining the national association but undertaking a purposeful strategy of providing a broader, more effective set of selective services for the major interest groups comprising the membership. I would think that as a part of this strategy discussion might be undertaken by the national and regional associations with a view to partial merger at least to the extent of sharing essential common services (membership data, dues collection, some types of information services, possibly centralized financial printing and editorial services). The economics of providing such services augurs strongly for merger to achieve economies of size. A further step in the direction of merger might be joint annual meetings planned by the AAEA and the regional associations including sectional sessions for the regional associations. Voting membership on the AAEA Executive Board for representatives of the regional associations would be required depending upon the extent of the merger.

At its current size and with the blend of services now provided the AAEA is at an awkward stage of development. It may be too large to depend upon largely volunteer, part-time executive management. It may be too small to afford full-time, professional management although it seems to be approaching a stage of growth where such management must be considered seriously. Even if merger with regional associations were to be achieved contracting of services with other associations would need to be explored as a means of fully attaining economies of size in providing some type of services. These matters are in the very early stage of exploration by a newly established Business Management Committee.

Conclusion

As evident from these remarks I believe the AAEA and the regional associations have opportunities to substantially improve their services to members. Choices must be made as to the scope and nature of these services and alternative methods of providing them. We may also need to examine closely the organization of the national and regional associations to better accomplish the purposes I have set forth. A beginning can be made by further discussion of these issues on future programs of your association and that of the AAEA.