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THE SMALL COLLEGE EXPERIENCE:
COMPARISONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Institutions of higher education span as great a range of size, illustrating as great a variation in fixed and variable inputs, as most of the firms that economists have occasion to study: farms, marketing concerns, recreation businesses, and the like. In the educational field, professionals at the smaller schools frequently look to their counterparts at larger institutions for innovation and leadership. This is, perhaps, a natural outgrowth of the age, prestige, and scope of academic enterprise which typify most of the larger universities.

On the basis of both study and professional employment at institutions ranging in size from 30,000 students to a mere 1,000, I now feel strongly that innovations and exchanges of information -- and even of personnel -- can flow most productively in both directions, rather than only "from the big ones downward." This is particularly true in the area of undergraduate teaching, a dimension of professional life in which many NAEC members are involved. My own experiences have pointed up advantages and limitations of both large and small schools, leading to what I hope are some interesting comparisons where teaching is concerned. My comments are admittedly subjective, and they are the product of one of those small samples which occasionally plague all of us in our investigations. They should, nonetheless, raise points which stimulate thought and discussion among the members of our association.

Some Background

My educational and professional history parallels, up to a point, the pattern followed by many of us in the profession: undergraduate study in a university of about 11,000, graduate degrees from a mid-western school of over 30,000, and first faculty position at a university of 9,000. All three were land-grant institutions, and both study and employment were affiliated primarily with departments of agricultural or resource economics.

After five years of the combined teaching-research appointment that comprised my first position after graduate school, I made the move which signifies a sharp departure from the apparent modal pattern among our membership. At that time I accepted a teaching faculty position in economics at a state college with a 1,000 enrollment, virtually

all undergraduates. The move was prompted by an increasingly strong commitment to undergraduate teaching and advising, a growing realization of my effectiveness in the classroom, and enthusiasm for the instructional portion of my appointment which outweighed substantially my affinity for formal research. At the same time, I had become increasingly aware that it was research publication, not excellence in the classroom, which weighed most heavily in such matters as promotion and tenure decisions. While "lip service" may be too slighting a term to apply to the attention afforded undergraduate education at a sizable university, there is little question that the bachelor's candidate often is relegated to a secondary role. Comments from others in the profession indicate that my experience and the university which employed me were not unique in this respect.

The New Setting

The move to the smaller school has proved informative, eye-opening, and satisfying. Having recently completed my third year there, I count the change of professional focus and setting as solidly positive. Holding a faculty position at a college which has the single mission of undergraduate instruction contrasts markedly with the conditions and atmosphere predominating in a larger, more diversified institution. We faculty members are primarily teachers, without split appointments which reflect official commitment to either research or public service. Our involvement in those two areas is, as a result, both unofficial and rather informal; the block of summer months created by an academic year appointment facilitates more concentrated pursuit of research interests for those who so choose. Our full-time teaching load normally is four courses (usually representing three or four preparations) per semester, for 12 to 14 contact hours. This load, particularly when out-of-class contact with students is considered, is both heavy and rather demanding. It is not, on the other hand, diluted by as many other commitments (paperwork, meetings, etc.) as those usually characterizing some form of split appointment.

Even for one strongly committed to undergraduate teaching, drawbacks exist. With no formal involvement in research, the more or less automatic flow of fresh information from research readings or findings into classroom presentations is inhibited. One has to, as a result, make more of a conscious effort at "keeping up" with what is happening in terms of discoveries of research phenomena and changes of thought. The library collections definitely are more limited in both variety and depth than those typical of larger institutions. The available books, journals, and other periodicals are, however, adequate resources for most undergraduate instruction. When more detailed or specialized publications are needed, the combination of library resources at a university just 40 miles away and opportunities for inter-library loans expand the collections from which one can draw. One other possible disadvantage for the teaching economist is that of labor force; having no graduate program in economics means no teaching assistants! As a result, the entire range of preparing for class, presenting and discuss-

sing material, composing examinations, and grading falls to the faculty member without the aid of an assistant. For one accustomed to partial dependence on at least one graduate student, the resulting work load can be sobering.

That same full involvement, however sobering and demanding, also can prove extremely stimulating. The faculty member appears to emerge from the process more aware of the concerns, needs, and academic progress of the student than he/she often is able to be when involved only at the less personal levels of preparation and presentation, especially when that presentation is confined to a large lecture.

Size of class has, of course, a tremendously powerful influence on this whole process of undergraduate teaching. Although our college has been under the continued pressures of tight (often level-funded) budgets, concern with accountability, and emphasis on cost-effectiveness, we have been able to maintain small class size as a feature of the institution. Our usual maximum enrollment per class is 28. While some variation around this number exists and an occasional large lecture might be twice that size, the 20 to 30 range typifies our economics course offerings. Even when a lecture of 50 to 60 is part of a course, the smaller discussion sections are customarily conducted by the faculty member; thus each student has continuous small-group interaction with the professional, rather than being farmed out to an assistant whose training and experience are relatively sparse. While we have few reliable measurements of our teaching effectiveness under these conditions, my own opinion is that the resulting opportunity for interaction and discussion yields at least as complete an economics education as that obtained by students at larger institutions. With respect to exploration of concepts and policy alternatives through discussion, it may well be a superior education.

Curricular Responsibility

Another facet of the small college experience which probably would open more widely the professional eyes of most land-grant institution economists is what might be termed the "we are it" factor. In the college of 1,000 it would be rare, to say the least, to find separate departments or other groups housing general economics, business-oriented studies, and courses dealing with agriculture and natural resources. That all these areas of endeavor fall under one umbrella (in our college's case, not a department but a working group of five within a 20-person Social Science Division) is no surprise, given the small size of the institution. Yet the implications for curriculum development and individual professional involvement differ markedly from those of the usual "separate department" format which most of us have experienced in university settings.

No longer can there be any grumbling about those faculty across the campus who somehow refuse to offer enough sections of introductory economics or accounting, or who teach an insufficient array of courses at

the higher levels. No longer can the faculty member shape his/her own load around a few specialized topics, relying on the business and economics staff elsewhere on campus to provide service offerings which include an abundance of sections for each introductory course. Those luxuries simply do not exist in the small college setting, where the same group must plan and coordinate curriculum at all levels. Particularly when a substantial role of service to other disciplines must be played, the resulting decisions regarding allocations of that scarce resource of faculty time are both fascinating and challenging. One is reminded of an old POGO cartoon sequence, with (if memory serves) the punchline; "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

Such responsibility for the entire economics and business curriculum appears to have advantages as well as the possible disadvantages of having to forego some specialized course offerings. Careful planning increases the likelihood of balance among the various instructional areas within the field, in contrast to the imbalance many of us have perceived when one of "the other" business or economics departments on a single campus has abruptly altered its curriculum, has expanded rapidly, or even has been curtailed; the planning usually is active rather than reactive, and as such it can be both effective and creative. Overseeing the entire discipline area has obvious advantages, also, when it comes to considerations of quality control and consistency in instruction. As economics courses are increasingly required or recommended by other disciplines (in our case, programs in environmental studies, human services, etc.), contact and coordination with other faculty members in a variety of fields increase. And with only limited opportunity to specialize in some esoteric sub-discipline of economics, each faculty member typically instructs freshmen through seniors during virtually every semester; this not only seems to assure a freshness of approach, but also appears to enhance the faculty member's effectiveness as an academic advisor. When one faculty member has over 20 student advisees (the average number for economics personnel at our college), such effectiveness is crucial if students are to be properly served.

Expanding the Focus

Our group of five faculty members is responsible for three inter-related curriculum areas: business management, economics, and a management-oriented recreation program. As a result, the courses that we can offer are not numerous, especially with the constant necessity of multiple sections of courses at the introductory level. Also, the presence of only five faculty persons threatens to create a rather heavily "inbred" program for any student who remains for a full four years at the college. To counteract such repeated exposure and to provide a range of courses complementary to our standard offerings, we attempt to employ part-time faculty for one or two courses each semester. These instructors, drawn from both public agencies (the state capital is only 35 miles from campus) and private industry, add refreshing breadth and new professional focus to our curriculum.

A further broadening influence, also drawing from off-campus expertise, is a program of faculty-supervised independent study. While independent study (including internship, practicum, and the like) is often part of a student's major at a larger university, the sheer abundance of professional talent on the large campus means that such study usually is not necessary for breadth. In the small school, however, off-campus study often appears crucial if the student is to have contact with a variety of professionals; this is particularly true for the career-oriented programs of study in which we economists customarily are active. Internships and other short-term placements in public agencies and private firms add, therefore, to the substance of the undergraduate program. Such work experiences also add professional employment to the student's dossier, and they sometimes lead directly to a full-time position upon graduation.

While most smaller schools, whether public or private, are oriented toward the liberal arts or other general programs, the students appear to hold an abundance of interest in the subdisciplines which constitute the professional fields of many NAEC members. Today's college student, perhaps because of the "back to the land" thrust and certainly because of a healthy skepticism toward some economic institutions and traditions, often wants to learn about the various facets of economics which affect rural life. He/she expresses interest in marketing, farm management, and land use decisions; this interest, while perhaps less intense than that of many conventional majors at a land-grant university, is nonetheless strong. The numerous students captivated by environmental issues also comprise a market and ready ear for the professional knowledge held by many practicing economists. One of my more popular courses is, in fact, a resource economics offering which uses the Barlowe text, thus paralleling what is a standard course at many state universities.

Opportunities

What implications, then, do these factors hold for the bulk of our membership, largely practicing economists at land-grant institutions? While I hope that you have drawn some inferences from my several descriptions and observations, I also would like to offer these three suggestions to those of you who hold a strong interest in and commitment to undergraduate education:

1. Pursue and develop professional acquaintance with economists teaching at smaller universities and colleges in your state. You may find their different perspectives and experiences stimulating, and they are most likely to enjoy the contact with your own professional focus and viewpoints. If such an acquaintance grows to encompass occasional mutual exchange of guest lectures, seminars, and the like, both students and faculty stand to benefit.

2. Consider spending at least a year or two in a full-time faculty position at a small institution. You certainly will find it informative and eye-opening, and you probably will find it extremely stimulating if you genuinely enjoy teaching and advising. You might even choose to remain there.
3. Initiate formal "faculty exchange" programs between your own school and others, for time spans from a semester on up. There are, granted, some personal and professional barriers to such arrangements. But, vigorously pursued and given the cooperation of an enlightened and innovative administration, such exchanges can work. They probably are particularly feasible within a single state system which includes both the land-grant university and a number of smaller state colleges.

It certainly would be presumptuous to suggest that "the real learning" occurs in the smaller institutions, to the exclusion of the large universities which have educated and now employ most of us in the profession. But some exciting kinds of education take place there, and it is an education which values many of the agricultural and natural resource-oriented topics with which we deal as professionals. Those of us who are committed to improving undergraduate instruction can contribute to that improvement by realizing that more than one size of institution has a great deal to offer. Working toward a free-flowing exchange of information, perspectives, and personnel can yield only positive effects on the education of our students and on the continued stimulation of ourselves as professional economists.