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THE EFFECTS OF THE RURAL RENAISSANCE MOVEMENT ON THE TRADITIONAL PROGRAMS OF THE COLLEGES OF LIFE SCIENCES AND AGRICULTURE

Gerald W. Howe

I was talking to a New Hampshire resident a short time ago about the state of agriculture here in New Hampshire. There was a feeling of despondency when he said, "My grandfather had a farm, my father had a garden and I have a can opener." That might be an overstatement, but it does say something about what is happening to agriculture, especially as it relates to population growth in the Northeast.

There is a change underway, however, that will affect this attitude, and this change will have an effect on the colleges of life sciences and agriculture, both in the Northeast and the nation. The change being addressed has been called the "Rural Renaissance Movement" and it is a refocusing of interests on the rural environment and associated lifestyle. To prepare themselves for this type of lifestyle, people are pursuing knowledge that they feel will help them to live and cope with the requirements of a "back to the land" orientation. To acquire these skills people are turning to the college of life sciences and agriculture and this trend is documented in enrollment figures over the last ten years.

Let us take a moment to review some statistics that substantiate this. At the University of New Hampshire in 1966-67 there was a total enrollment of 6,119. Of these, 387 were enrolled in the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture. This represented 6.3 percent of the total University enrollment. Ten years later, in the academic year 1976-77, the total University enrollment was 10,348, and the college of life sciences and agriculture enrollment was 1,606 or 15.8 percent of the total. In that ten year period the University grew by almost 70 percent while the college of life sciences and agriculture grew by over 400 percent.¹ (Much of this increase is in the areas of Forestry and Home Economics.)

Why has this occurred, and what does it mean to the mission of the college? These are issues that must be addressed if the institution is to remain responsive.

The first question, "why," can be answered fairly simply. People are searching for meaningful personal skills that have a value to the individual, that do more than simply make that individual marketable in society. These skills allow an independence from the traditional economic system based on specialization, and mean that the person does not have to find his or her niche within that system. The next question, what does this mean to the college, is somewhat more complex. First, it means that the college will be training practitioners, especially at the undergraduate level. This means that the formal programs should focus on the reality of the subject matter and not the theory. More hands-on experiential type programs should be developed to facilitate a shift away from the research channel. This will give a new flexibility to the undergraduate program and respond to the increased participation of non-majors in the life sciences and agricultural undergraduate program.

As mentioned earlier the undergraduate enrollment of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture is presently 1,606. The graduate enrollment is 214; of these half are in Occupational Education and the majority of the remainder are with the Institute of Natural and Environmental Resources in Forestry or Conservation. The remainder of the departments of the college have very limited graduate enrollment.²

The campus-based educational programs are not the only ones to be affected by the "Rural Renaissance" movement. The off-campus program of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, the Cooperative Extension Service, is also experiencing increasing program demands. This increase is not only an increase in demand for traditional programs, but a demand for new and more technically oriented programs.

Exposure to the formal on-campus programs of the college has an effect on an individual's sophistication when that person becomes a participant in Extension audiences. For example, he may know exactly what to do, but he won't know what the tools look like. People are trying to apply the knowledge that they have to their lifestyle but are frustrated by their lack of practical experience. This new audience is theoretically prepared but is not as experienced as the "traditional" audience.

There exists a commitment to a romantically perceived lifestyle that has at its base a set of values that might not be in concert with the traditional values that have been the base for Extension programming in the past. The Extension Service must be aware of, and sensitive to, this value conflict to remain objective educators. The potential areas of conflict range all the way from organic versus "chemical" agriculture to the moral perceptions of extended families. Though the management and resolution of conflict is not the intent of this paper, it bears mentioning as it relates to the mission of the college, for it is a life science.

The "Rural Renaissance" movement will also have an effect on the physical characteristics of rural areas. The most important characteristic is the pattern of land ownership and the scale of operation of agricultural enterprises. As larger tracts of land are broken down into smaller operations, a variety of issues are raised. These range from different managerial techniques to the legal requirement for establishing cooperatives.

The term appropriate technology is often used as a catch phrase for the needs of smaller agricultural enterprises, and appropriate technology can be directly related to the research responsibility of the college's experiment station. As the audience that needs this type of supportive research expands, the responsibility of the college to respond to their demands expands also. Techniques for labor intensive agriculture are important, as are organic farming facts as well as feelings. Economic issues such as direct marketing, and cooperative marketing arrangements or farmers' markets, take on new importance. Other economic considerations are cooperative ownership of production equipment or processing facilities, or the leasing arrangements for land to create a resource

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¹Bulletins of the University of New Hampshire, 1969 and 1977.

²Graduate and undergraduate bulletins of the University of N.H. 1977.

base to support a larger scale enterprise that might be impossible in the newly established land ownership pattern. These are areas where the total resources of the college must become involved if it is to keep pace with evolving rural needs.

An adjunct area is the associated rural entrepreneur. This might take the form of a seasonal cottage industry to supplement a subsistence agricultural existence which enables people to participate in the traditional economic system to obtain those goods and services that the individuals are unable to provide for themselves. It is imperative that the college address the entire lifestyle that encompasses the subjective components and not just those individual components in isolation.

Within the outreach branch of the college, the Extension Service, the role and responsibility of the agent takes on a new focus. The agent must be a generalist practitioner with experience that allows him or her to relate directly to the audience. This does not mean that the agent must agree philosophically but must be able to understand the philosophies and relate to them.

In the absence of an expanding staff, perhaps the various responsibilities to clients might be shifted. Specialists and area agents might assume responsibility for the traditional "commercial producer" while the county staff accepts the responsibility for small scale and part-time farmers. The entire Extension staff must be aware of process models for group organization and conflict management to enable them to help the various groups identify and relate to the larger community of interest in the rural society.

Some factors that will affect identity with the "Rural Renaissance" movement are as follows:

Enterprise Budgeting This will take on a new meaning because the enterprise might be part-time and does not have to be income producing. In fact, an individual might feel that there is enough intrinsic value in an enterprise to warrant subsidizing it from outside income.

Opportunity Cost The opportunity cost for labor might be considered to be zero. The individual might feel that the lifestyle fulfills enough personal values that financial returns are not necessary for time spent. This also is related to the intrinsic value of the lifestyle.

Cottage Industries These will increase as the necessity for a certain cash flow becomes obvious. Locating in rural areas

automatically eliminates the availability of certain employment opportunities to generate the cash flow needed to purchase goods and services that individuals or families are unable to provide for themselves. Associated directly with this is the opportunity to provide these goods and services to the new audience. This could be done on a part-time basis by one of the new rural participants or by the expansion of already existing support facilities.

Land Cost This will increase simply because of the market function of demand, but also because some individuals might elect to leave the established economic system for a rural lifestyle. Some individuals might have the available capital to pay a price inflated above the economic potential of the productive capacity of the land. This relates back to the enterprise budgeting issue. Land, however, is not the only production component to be affected by this phenomenon. Machinery is also affected. People might tend to over-purchase machinery capacity or other technological inputs. Several reasons might be responsible for this, including the inability to project need or the unavailability of the appropriate technology.

Support Industry Agricultural support industries will be direct beneficiaries of the "Rural Renaissance" movement. Indirect beneficiaries will be the agricultural enterprises that are already in existence. These support industries are an expanding market and therefore can justify their business existence as well as provide economies of scale to their customers.

Political Support As agricultural interests in the rural areas increase the potential political support for the college and the Cooperative Extension Service increases also. This will only happen, however, if the institution is responsive to audience needs and demands. If the institution, on the other hand, does not or cannot respond; then its political opposition will increase.

Land Use The "Rural Renaissance" movement also focuses attention on the land and its use. As more and more people become involved in agricultural production, the need to protect the productive capacity of our agricultural resources will gain support. Even though the scale of ownership has changed, the productive capacity has remained. Also, new allies in the agricultural community have been enlisted to bring new resources to that community to work for community interests.

These are a few of the issues that should be investigated by the college as it periodically re-evaluates its mission within the society that created it, and continues to allow it to exist.