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# ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FAILURES IN PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

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In his address before the 1975 annual meeting of the American Agricultural Economics Association, J. Carroll Bottum discussed "Policy Formation and the Economist." He observed: "We have made some progress in public policy education in the last one-half century. We have developed an educational approach to controversial public issues. We have had some limited success with specific programs. We have legitimized the educational function of public policy education to a considerable degree."

Especially during the past quarter century have the objectives of public policy education programs been defined and innovative approaches to public policy problems developed. In the arena of agricultural policy education, notable national successes on timely topics could be enumerated—for example, the recent national effort on "Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture?" Effective extension programs have been added with material assistance from the Farm Foundation in its role as a catalyst.

In the following sections, I will confine my analysis to *agricultural* policy education.

## BACKGROUND

Agricultural policy issues are often major national economic issues in the United States. This is because the North American continent, and the United States in particular, is the "bread basket" of the world. It is the dominant area in world agricultural trade, and it is the "ever normal granary" in times of worldwide crop shortages such as we have experienced over the past three years.

We also have to understand the nature of the Extension Service—the educational agency. Even though only 15 percent of the value added in the United States food industry comes from farming (as compared to approximately 85 percent by input suppliers, output processors, and marketing firms), the American public is committed to the family farm—in both extension and research. This commitment is expressed by the American people through its elected representatives, especially at the federal level.

Until the attitudes of the people change, I doubt seriously if Extension will expand its efforts significantly with the nonfarm sectors of the food industry. Highest priority will remain with the individual farmers, their research and extension needs, and their policy concerns.

#### **AGRICULTURAL POLICY EDUCATION—WHERE IS IT AND WHY?**

I have viewed agricultural policy education from three vantage points over the past three decades: (1) as an agricultural economist in a land-grant institution, (2) as an employee of a foundation attempting to act as a catalyst in agricultural policy, and (3) as an extension director in a land-grant university. In each position I have struggled with the following questions: (1) Why do we have essentially the same number of public policy specialists as twenty years ago—with only the names changing over time with transfers to new assignments or retirements? (2) Why is the concentration of agricultural policy specialists by region as it is and essentially unchanged over the past twenty years?

In the world of economics two basic laws (among many, of course) have determined where agricultural policy specialists are located as well as why—the law of comparative economic advantage and the law of least comparative economic disadvantage.

In the international world of agricultural production and trade we have an immense comparative advantage in the production of certain commodities—notably corn, soybeans, and wheat. Other more limited examples such as citrus and a few other specialized commodities could be cited. In the domestic economy we could include milk production in the lake states versus other geographic areas of the country and, likewise, pork production in the Corn Belt. The agricultural policy of this sector of American agriculture is heavily determined by economics, with politics relegated to a very minor role by comparison. Here agricultural policy education was pioneered, is strongly supported with specialists, demands a continuing education program with the key agricultural leadership, and is a major educational responsibility of the Extension Service. In the states falling in the above category, the overall economic and agricultural policy education programs are one, if not the key, element in the success of their total agricultural extension program.

Production in other large geographic areas of the United States is determined by the law of least comparative economic disadvantage. Sugar production in the United States, milk production in the Northeast, and cotton production in the Southeast are examples. Agricultural policy and production are highly influenced by politics

in these areas, with economics often relegated to a minor role by comparison. Such areas are concerned about supports, subsidies, quotas, and the like from the political arena to make production an economic possibility. Political alternatives are not turned over to economists for educational programs, and the director deals directly with his elected officials on such matters. We find remarkably few policy specialists in such states, and much of their educational program is confined to nonagricultural matters.

#### NOTES ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The essence of community development is public policy education at the local level. Currently it is concentrated in the same states and regions as agricultural policy education programs. The Rural Development Act of 1972 has focused added national attention on this area of concern, but virtually no funds for educational efforts have been provided to date. Yet the educational objectives and approaches are available as a result of the efforts and experience in agricultural policy education programs. The federal support base to fund this important undertaking is not apparent at the moment.

#### SUMMARY

J. Carroll Bottum further summarized in his paper, "Policy Formation and the Economist," as follows: "We need in every state university a minimum critical mass of at least four people in the public policy area. . . . Is it just possible in the period ahead that the land-grant universities, through a cadre of practically minded scholarly economists, could add to that public policy knowledge stream in such a way that it would make a difference? I think it is worth a try."

I have tried to describe the current situation as it is after twenty-five years, and to give my analysis of why—imprecise as it turns out to be. Bottum describes what ought to be as we look ahead. Can the necessary support base be found, both at the funding and administrative level, to move toward the goal described by Bottum?