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Elements of Quality in Agricultural Business Education Programs

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Abstract

This paper describes strategies for developing quality agribusiness management educational programs that include appropriate amounts of management and marketing subject matter, emphasize lifelong learning, avoid weak options, avoid mistakes made by business schools in the accreditation process, and hold potential for reversing the decline in undergraduate enrollments in agricultural economics.

Elements of Quality in Agricultural Business Education Programs

Undergraduate enrollments in many schools of agriculture and departments of agricultural economics have plummeted in recent years. Litzenberg and Mather report that the average enrollment decline between 1981 and 1986 was 25 percent at 34 U.S. colleges of agriculture and 14 percent in departments of agricultural economics within those colleges. The enrollment decline at the school level is not new and has been occurring since the early 1980s, but the decline at the department level is a more recent, and partially unexpected, phenomenon. For example, as recently as 1985, Blank reported that most U.S. departments of agricultural economics expected to maintain future enrollment at levels that existed in 1984.

The enrollment decline in undergraduate agricultural economics programs is a concern for several reasons. First, in many schools of agriculture, agricultural economics has the largest number of undergraduate majors and frequently generates more credit hours than are allocated to the unit for teaching. This benefits other disciplines/departments and the school in maintaining faculty resources. Second, many agricultural economics departments seem to be unable to meet the demand by employers for graduates, and this situation is not likely to change in the near term. Coulter, et al. project a tight market during the next few years for undergraduates trained for positions in marketing, merchandising, and sales and for students with master's degrees in agribusiness management and finance. And third, business and management programs across the U.S. are drawing students who might otherwise major in agricultural economics.[1]

Beyond the immediate concern of enrollments, a longer range concern for the profession is that employers who have traditionally hired agricultural economics graduates are beginning to hire more business school graduates, either because agricultural economics departments don't have enough graduates,

or because they don't believe we offer the curriculum and training that they desire their employees to have. This is particularly noteworthy when one considers that agribusiness is the largest employer of our students, employing between 50% and 80% of graduates from agricultural economics departments (Litzenberg, et al.). An opportunity exists, therefore, for agricultural economics departments to further emphasize the agribusiness curriculum as a means of increasing enrollment and for meeting the demands of the food and fiber system for well-trained employees.

A successful agribusiness curriculum will depend on its structure and quality as perceived by employers. The main purpose of this paper is to address the issue of creating quality in agribusiness management education at the undergraduate level. In doing this, we review briefly some of the dialogue and events that make this an important topic and then address the issue of quality.

Curriculum Opportunities in Agribusiness Management

French, et al. have made clear the opportunity to meet the growing demand for students trained in agribusiness management. As with most opportunities, however, some repositioning of resources and changes in philosophy will be required. As Padberg states, "If we want to place more students in agribusiness firms or other business firms, they must have a curriculum more related to leadership roles, which blends in more management and product marketing subject matter" (p. 1). A recent development that draws attention to the need to restructure agricultural business education programs is the creation of the Agribusiness Education Development (AED) Project. The AED Project, which involves officials of agricultural businesses, deans of agriculture and schools of business, and agricultural economics faculty members, has extended national initiatives relating to agribusiness education. The project has encouraged development of joint educational programs involving schools of

business and departments of agricultural economics. Part of the impetus for the AED Project emerged from dissatisfaction with existing agricultural business education programs.

A further development that creates more significance for the opportunity we have in agribusiness management education is the fact that business schools have been under growing criticism that they do not have an appropriate focus and that quality of their programs must be improved (for example, see Business-Higher Education forum; Hugstad; Jenkins, et al.; and Kiechel). We do not suggest that this creates an opportunity in a competitive sense for agricultural economics department. Rather, we suggest that we learn from the debate and look for opportunities to cooperate with our colleagues in business.

Considerable effort and dialogue has been devoted to defining curriculum structure for both undergraduate and graduate programs in agribusiness management (Litzenberg, et al.; French and Erven; and French, et al.). Two recent efforts deserve special mention. The Agribusiness Management Aptitude and Skills Survey was a major initiative undertaken by the AED Project in the mid-1980s. This survey, conducted by Professors Vernon Schneider and Kerry Litzenberg of the Department of Agricultural Economics at Texas A&M University, was a national survey of agribusiness executives which solicited information regarding industry expectations of future agribusiness graduates. And in April 1987, the AED Project sponsored a White House conference on agricultural business dealing with "Developing Tomorrow's Agribusiness Leaders". Attendees included academic, corporate, and agribusiness leaders who discussed problems in contemporary agribusiness education.

Other sources of information we have for structuring curriculum include the current debate regarding business education and a developing literature from agribusiness management research (for example, the recent work of Westgren, et al.). From this work one can conceptualize a curriculum at both

the undergraduate and graduate levels that is unique to agribusiness and that also satisfies appropriate regional or local "niches" for a particular program.

Quality in the Agribusiness Management Curriculum

We accept the argument made by others that agribusiness management education is unique within the broader context of business management, and we also concur that many of the characteristics of a strong business management program must also be present in a strong agribusiness management program. Therefore, we draw heavily from the literature pertaining to business management education in laying a conceptual foundation for quality in agribusiness management education. We do this because considerable dialogue is occurring at the present time between the private sector and schools of business regarding enhancement of the business curriculum and because the literature/dialogue related to agribusiness management has focused more heavily on definition of a core curriculum. We do recognize that the definition of a core curriculum reflects qualitative dimensions and that French, et al. and French and Erven have discussed issues of quality in agribusiness education. Our intent is to carry that dialogue further and to focus on curriculum, faculty, and support resources.

Curriculum

An agribusiness curriculum must reflect the fundamental knowledge/skills that potential managers must possess. According to Freedman and Stumpf, variables that have been shown to relate to success in management include interpersonal skills (e.g., leadership), personal skills (e.g., communication), and administrative skills (e.g., organization, planning). Evidence suggests that a curriculum "core" is important in both agricultural economics and business. We use the term, core, to reflect fundamental knowledge that all potential

professionals must have in a particular discipline (as opposed to use of the term to reflect a specific set of courses). Comments of the Business-Higher Education Forum are particularly relevant here, "... the goal must be to develop not only specific knowledge but a firm basis for continued learning. Indeed, modern business education programs should be distinguished by their commitment to the principle of lifelong learning" (p. 15).

Courses that help develop a student's interpersonal and personal skills are important to both agricultural economics and business, and their overall importance should be emphasized. Litzenberg and Schneider found that "Interpersonal Characteristics" and "Communication Skills" ranked first and second, respectively, out of six general skill categories in their Agribusiness Management Aptitude and Skill Survey (pp. 11-12).[2] These skills are not taught in entry level courses; what is needed, is curriculum in these areas that fits into the agribusiness major and that constitutes the core in interpersonal and personal skills.

Recognizing that some agricultural economics departments may have a curriculum orientation with unique characteristics, a common "core" would reflect an underlying theme of applied problem solving and would focus on firm level decision making, policy analysis, price analysis, quantitative techniques, and computer applications. The "core" in business management would include the common body of skills in management science, accounting, finance, marketing, quantitative techniques, and computer applications.[3]

In addressing the issue of quality in curriculum, we rely quite heavily on subjective criteria. We are influenced by a concern for relevance of curriculum and providing a "learning" environment. Curriculum relevance in business management is receiving a lot of emphasis currently with concern expressed that there is a "reality gap" in management education. The concern is not for more "vocationalism" (students have satisfactory skill levels), but students are not well prepared for the dynamic economic and social environment

both internal and external to the firm. We teach "about" things like interpersonal relations and business planning, but we do little to help students in developing those skills. We offer little in the way of a small business orientation, and yet this may be one of the most important areas to emphasize in agribusiness management. We must seek linkages with colleagues in other disciplines as well as with individuals from business to help provide more of an interdisciplinary focus and a "real world" focus to our curriculum.

Given the preceding comments as background, the following are important dimensions in establishing quality in curriculum in agribusiness management education:

1. "Core" curriculum in agricultural economics, business management, interpersonal skills, and personal skills. Each area is characterized by introductory and advanced courses that (a) assure subject matter breadth, (b) "real world" relevance and application of knowledge, and (c) an interdisciplinary philosophy that ties the core areas together. The core curriculum should reflect unique advantages of a program/school (e.g., faculty resources, linkages with private sector, unique curricular opportunities, etc.).
2. An internship/experiential learning program that reinforces the core curriculum and the philosophy that knowledge is not relevant to a student unless he/she can do something with that knowledge; and one that provides students a view of "living" in an organization. Ideally, an internship program should be administered by one person who can assure consistency and quality of the program and who can serve as a focal point to strengthen university linkages with business. Alternatives to an internship program may be appropriate. For example, some departments have developed successful education programs in cooperation with the National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) that provide very useful learning experiences. The key is to

provide a learning experience that "stretches" the student to draw on his/her skills and personal attributes.

3. A philosophy that encourages use of the best delivery technique/ learning environment for the material being taught. We use a variety of delivery techniques (e.g., lecture, case study, simulation, etc.), but unfortunately, we have little research to support many of the techniques (Freedman and Stumpf). What seems intuitive is that there is a relationship between material, teaching technique, and learning. We must recognize that relationship, encourage experimentation by faculty and students, and resist designating certain courses as ones that will be taught using one approach only.
4. A continuing education program for agribusiness employees that focuses on the needs of the business community and takes advantage of the faculty resources associated with the agribusiness curriculum. The advantages are obvious; closer ties with the business community for funding, developmental programs, defining research agendas, providing part-time faculty.
5. A philosophy that curriculum development is an ongoing process. Business firms operate in a very dynamic environment and employees must respond to changes in that environment. We should expect to change our curriculum and teaching techniques to maintain the relevance that agribusiness firms and students will demand of our programs.

Faculty

Quality in agribusiness education requires a cadre of faculty who can provide the curriculum alluded to in the previous section. In addition to having functional specialization in appropriate areas, these individuals must have an agribusiness orientation. Ideally, such a focus would be the result

of their research, extension, and/or consulting activities. We envision a critical mass of faculty representing agricultural economics, business management, English/communication, and other areas appropriate to developing interpersonal and personal skills of students. Faculty in agricultural economics should coordinate the curriculum and work with faculty in the other disciplines to achieve the desired curriculum structure and focus. Special sections or possibly special courses may be necessary in the related disciplines.

It is difficult to define the critical mass of faculty in the related disciplines, but somewhat easier in agricultural economics. Faculty in agricultural economics who work in the agribusiness area must have a management orientation (through formal education, work experience, or consulting) and a functional specialization. A strong agribusiness program must have faculty who have expertise in financial management, marketing management, and business policy/strategic management. Even though faculty with similar expertise may be available on campus in schools of business, it's unlikely that we can rely on them to teach some of the agribusiness management courses either because of enrollment "caps" in their courses or the fact that they may not be able to develop an agribusiness orientation. On the other hand, those faculty may be quite interested in joint ventures in research or continuing education programs. Furthermore, if we are to be successful in developing linkages with agribusinesses (for placement, research, and other reasons) we must have faculty with the appropriate expertise. Although absolute numbers have little meaning, in agricultural economics it would seem that a minimum of three or four faculty with the expertise noted above would be necessary to conduct an effective agribusiness management program.

In addition to having a nucleus of faculty in agribusiness management, professional development opportunities must be available for faculty. There are a number of aspects to faculty development. Recognition of consulting and applied research in cooperation with business firms must be part of the

promotion and tenure process. Sabbatic and other professional leave opportunities must be encouraged. Two particularly attractive programs would be "executive in residence" and "faculty in residence" where representatives from the private sector would join faculty and faculty would move in the opposite direction. The latter move seems to be more difficult to achieve, and yet the benefits of both types of moves seem obvious from curriculum and professional development standpoints. One other aspect of faculty development is creation of opportunities for greater interdisciplinary ties. If we are to achieve quality in agribusiness curriculum such linkages must be pursued. This may be the least costly form of faculty development from a fiscal standpoint, but the most difficult to develop unless such activity is rewarded.

Support Resources

It goes without saying that all academic programs must have adequate support resources. This issue is raised on every campus. We have little that is new to add; we simply make the plea for adequate teaching facilities, electronic and communication resources (video equipment, microcomputers, etc.), adequate library resources, and financial support. With respect to the library resource we do note the importance of reference materials like corporate reports, financial newsletters and rating services, etc. that are important to understanding the business environment. We also note and emphasize the critical importance of offering placement services for students. A placement center within the department or college (as opposed to the university) that is operated by professional staff is a resource that has obvious value to students and faculty. A placement center offers another linkage between agribusiness firms and the university and it is important to have control of that function.

Related Issues

There are several issues related to quality in curriculum that we have not addressed, but that we recognize deserve serious consideration. We raise these issues but treat them only briefly because of space limitations. One issue relates to the importance of being able to link with a business program accredited through the American Academy of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). French, et al. have raised this issue and we agree with them that linking with a well regarded business school would be beneficial to an agribusiness curriculum. The business schools at most land grant institutions are accredited and so opportunities should exist for interaction.

A second issue relates to accreditation of agribusiness programs. In light of recent criticism of the AACSB guidelines and the call for more flexibility in that process (guidelines are criticized as being too rigid concerning resources and curriculum), we should probably wait to see how schools of business deal with their accreditation problems before creating our own.

Another issue pertains to developing enrollment guidelines to control student numbers and to create a quality control mechanism. Such guidelines and standards may be troubling to us as we seek to increase student numbers, and even when enrollments were high in agricultural economics we did not restrict enrollment. A danger we face is that an agribusiness management program can become a "default" major for students who are not accepted in business. If we allow this to happen we may jeopardize our own program. Furthermore, our colleagues in business and other disciplines may insist that we restrict enrollment to gain their cooperation.

A fourth issue relates to creation of an option versus a major. This is not an issue in semantics. Many departments probably have an "agribusiness option" which has been created by taking the core in agricultural economics and adding a few courses with "management" in the title. Typically, this can be done quite easily and with little review at the college or university

level. The term, major, implies a specific curriculum and plan of study with formal approval, and it is, therefore, the preferred approach. Related to this issue is the creation by many production departments in colleges of agriculture of "agribusiness options". Those options are frequently weak in agribusiness management curriculum, and at those schools where agribusiness programs exist, such options should be carefully scrutinized at the school level to ensure that they meet minimum quality standards.

Finally, what is the relationship between undergraduate and graduate curriculum in agribusiness management? Can a strong undergraduate program be developed in the absence of a graduate program? The answer is probably "yes," but there are powerful advantages that go with a graduate program including faculty quality, synergism between research and education, and linkages to agribusinesses.

Conclusions

An opportunity exists for the profession to meet the demand for students trained in agribusiness management. We address the issue of establishing quality in an agricultural business curriculum. Not all departments can offer what we propose, and that does not mean that they should not offer an agribusiness management program. However, those departments that can achieve high curriculum quality will achieve a significant advantage in program development and student placement. We arrive at this conclusion by observing the experience of business schools in this decade and our belief that agribusiness firms are insisting on such quality.

Footnotes

[1] These reasons cannot be substantiated empirically; they reflect the general impression the authors receive from conversations with colleagues in other departments.

[2] "Interpersonal Characteristics" ranked first, followed by "Communication Skills", "Business and Economics Skills", "Technical Skills", "Computer, Quantitative, and Management Information", and "Previous Work Experience".

[3] Reference to skill areas is subject to interpretation. That seems appropriate to us in that there should be opportunity to take advantage of department strengths and opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation.

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