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# ILLINOIS AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS STAFF PAPER

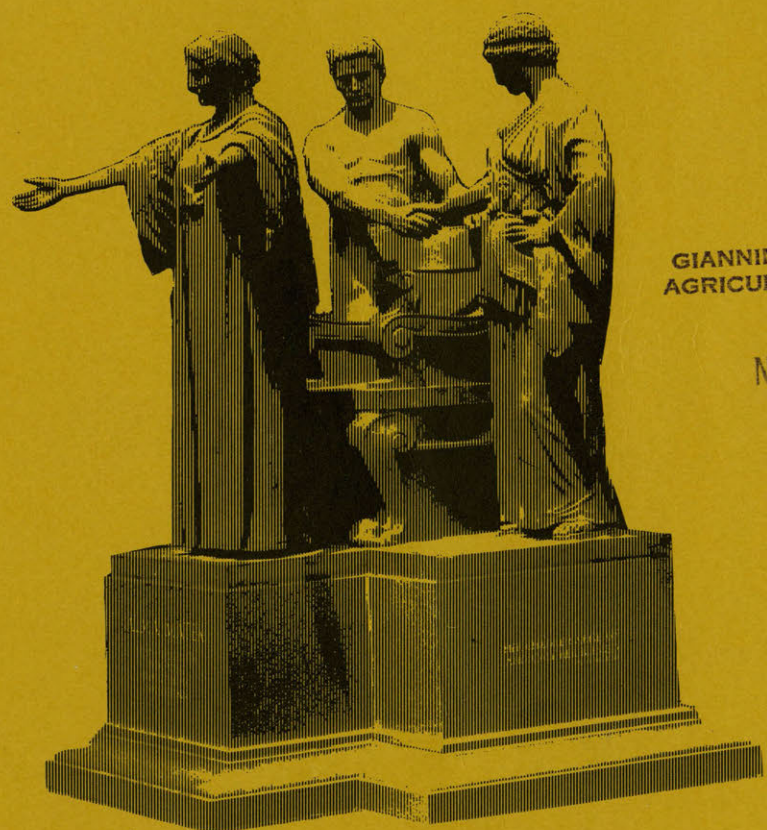
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AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY EDUCATION  
FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS--  
PERFORMANCE AND ALTERNATIVES

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## AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY EDUCATION FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS--

### PERFORMANCE AND ALTERNATIVES

R. G. F. Spitze\*

Public policy about the agricultural and food sector has received high, if not top, billing on the public's agenda, in the press, and among the utterings of our profession for over half a decade.<sup>1</sup> Seldom, however, was the dialogue directed at the crucial question of this session: Is our educational house in order for the public policy needs of our society? Rather, our dialogue has flowed around the policy direction, content, process, and research base. I will argue that each of these is significantly shaped by the education provided to researchers, teachers, citizens, and public policy decision makers.

My first approximation answer to the question posed is: Yes, our policy education for graduate students gets a passing grade, but barely--say, a B- or C. A flunking grade is inappropriate because there is too much evidence of positive accomplishment in reaching our clientele with dedicated classroom teaching, with an expanding cadre of professional policy workers, and with an avalanche of scholarly publications.<sup>2</sup> But the possibilities--and need--for improvement are legion. A performance of A or even B+ merits our attention.

In order to assess the proper grade for our performance and to suggest remedial work, I plan to proceed through the following steps: 1. Establish the scope of our inquiry with relevant definitions; 2. Identify the competencies or understandings needed in policy education; 3. Evaluate our performance in view of alternatives; 4. Concluding priorities for graduate policy education.

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## I. Scope and Definitions

Policy Education. What do we mean by the commonplace words, policy education? I submit herein lies one of our first deficiencies. We have not fashioned through serious scholarship and professional dialogue a systematic functional body of concepts about the subject matter under discussion, and I have spoken to this issue elsewhere (Spitze). Every professional speaker and writer can and does use the terminology that suits his/her fancy. Other areas of scholarship, such as chemistry, human physiology, mathematics, or even production economics, could not have made their recognized progress if they had been indifferent to definition.

As policy is used in these contexts, I believe we generally mean public policy, in contrast to private policy. This is a critical distinction between public policy, as decisions/actions of a representative/participatory/democratic governmental process, and private policy, as all other decisions/actions. If this difference is not understood, or better still explicitly stated, the analysis, discourse, and communications have already begun to fail. Policy qua policy surely has to encompass all human endeavor and--as it is often stated only partially with tongue in cheek--all economists are "policy economists."

Such efforts to conceptualize in no way cast a normative insinuation that professional pursuits other than public policy are any less important, productive, or prestigious. It simply recognizes that public decision making, as defined, is a distinct phenomenon--unique bit of the "stuff of this planet" if you please--and its study and understanding is affected by such a delineation.

We note yet one additional delineation in the title of our discussion: Agricultural and Food Policy. I suggest our subject matter, translated, refers to representative governments' policies emerging primarily out of problems



about the production, distribution, consumption, and trade of food and fiber products. This excludes most of the knowledge known as public policy, such as fiscal and monetary policy, education, labor, defense, transportation, energy, housing, urban development, health policy, etc. They have their own arenas of action, disciplinary marching tunes, and educational paths. Still these policy areas come together at frequent interfaces, such as agricultural and food policy with labor policy, or energy, or transportation. However, to recognize area interfaces is not to deny the existence of analytical boundaries between such areas as agriculture and energy or food and health. Stronger thrusts of scholarship than ours have thrived on just such interrelations among distinctly differentiated subject areas, as with physics, chemistry, and biology.

Finally, we recognize our primary disciplinary thrust as being economics, not political or social or psychological. Even though important interdependencies exist among these in the policy milieu, our concern here is focused on economic relationships and economic education about public policy for agriculture and food.

Now, what do we purport to do in our economic education about public agricultural and food policy? Public policy education encompasses three processes: generating reliable relationships (dependable knowledge), disseminating that knowledge, and developing capabilities for individual and group participation in public policy formation. This knowledge in which we deal, both theoretical and empirical, includes at least the following: 1. provisions of public policies already developed; 2. factors determining them; 3. their consequences; 4. the institutions and processes of policy making; 5. the situation and trends of the economy particularly relevant to the policies;

and 6. alternative policies for existing and likely future public problems. This is the nature, content, and function of our policy education. It sets the objectives for our teaching and the criteria by which to measure its performance.

Relevant Clientele and Roles of Policy Economists. To understand the clientele of our public policy graduate education in the agricultural and food area is partially achieved by understanding the roles of professional policy workers. I say partially, because the most important ultimate clientele --at least in numbers--is not the professional worker, but the citizen and interest group leader. Citizens, regardless of occupation, position, or educational background, in their normal process of living, have the opportunity--and responsibility in a selfish sense--in a participatory governmental system to help develop public policies. Likewise, they must continually make their own private policy choices within the public policy structure. Although the citizen is not as direct a clientele for graduate educators as for undergraduate and extension professionals, they should not be overlooked as a vital indirect objective in graduate teaching.

Another less recognized clientele of our graduate policy education is the professional in the related social science fields of economics, sociology, political science, etc. Even though their prime subject matter may not be public policy, their analyses and professional decision making, be it concerned with financing agriculture, identifying the social structure, or predicting elections, is affected by their general knowledge of particular public policy areas. Three instances of students come to mind. Each took courses in Public Agricultural and Food Policy as a part of graduate study: an economics student subsequently was chief staff analyst for a new state tax

policy; a political science student was later a legislator and candidate for Lieutenant Governor; and another is now a prominent scholar in Agricultural Movement professional literature.

Beyond these less direct clienteles of the citizen and the professional social scientist, there are five important clienteles of professional policy workers for whom graduate education in policy is especially geared: 1. Teachers of public agricultural and food policy; 2. Policy researchers in the public sector; 3. Policy educators in public extension and continuing education; 4. Governmental policy decision makers and staffs; 5. Policy specialists in the private sector.

Although the professional clientele in each of these roles needs a common base of knowledge and educational experience, their career objectives and the uses made of the relevant policy knowledge varies significantly.<sup>3</sup> The first three roles of professional policy workers, mostly in the public sector, should be differentiated by their commitment to objective, positive analysis, and a search for alternative policies for major public issues. If a judgmental, normative stance is taken by these policy workers, it logically should be as utterances of private citizens. And, to be sure, contributions of distinction are indeed made by such policy specialists functioning as citizen leaders. However, the public's charge to these policy workers is to generate and disseminate reliable relevant knowledge, including alternative policy choices that could be chosen--but chosen by the public. A variety of professional backgrounds, educational roots, and human sensitivities within the public policy workers' community is the public's insurance that the most reliable information and useful range of alternatives will be attained. Unfortunately, the public and private hats that these policy workers wear are not always distinguishable.

The fourth role of professional policy workers, as public policy decision makers and their staff, is differentiated from the previous roles by its almost singular normative commitment, e.g., policy appointees with the Secretary of Agriculture or Congressional Committee policy staff. Their public responsibility is to be respectful of the best, reliable knowledge, but always to implement a policy, to defend it, alter it, or propose one believed to be in the public interest. Often the policy being advanced is one duly formulated by the public policy process. Objectivity is obviously still a prime characteristic of the work but primarily to support a particular policy position and not to pursue alternative policies. This is not to depreciate such policy work but rather to respect it for its proper functioning in the policy making of a participatory government.

The fifth role of the professional policy worker, those with private businesses or interest groups, either as employee or self-employed, is continually cast in both the positive and normative pursuits, e.g., policy analysts with national farmer organizations or managers of agribusiness firms. Similar to the previous role of public decision maker, the private policy worker is guided by a particular policy position, one developed or accepted to serve the needs of that private interest, its goals and its values. Here, the "objective function," so useful in much current economic analysis, can more precisely be known, conceptualized, and targeted for achievement. The more authoritarian, centrally controlled, or unified is the private interest being represented, the easier is the specification of the policy goal to be sought. However, the policy worker in the private sector still respects the positive approach, that is, the development of reliable knowledge and understandings of public policy so as to be most effective in achieving the private policy goals being sought.



## II. Understandings Relevant to Graduate Education in Public Policy

In view of these professional roles identified for graduate policy students interested in the agricultural and food sector, what should we be teaching in our graduate education? What should be the content of our courses; which competencies are of highest priority; when are particular teaching methods uniquely appropriate?

In my search for answers to these questions, I have relied heavily upon the logical implications of the previous review of the roles played by professional policy workers, the responsibilities they carry, and the clientele they serve.

Subject Matter Basic to All Agricultural Economics Graduates. Certain core subject matter, or understandings, important for policy graduate students is also a common core for all graduate students in agricultural economics. As a consequence, attention to these core subject areas per se in policy courses should be stingily restricted so as not to infringe upon other critical subject matter unique to that area. Further, it is assumed that the policy student, in common with all graduate students, will have adequate general and appropriate specialized knowledge, such as awareness of societal evolution and communication skills.

One of these common core areas of understanding is advanced economic theory. Contemporary economic thought understood in both verbal and mathematical form is one necessary--but not sufficient--part of the policy worker's tool kit. It provides reliable positive type knowledge of how economic phenomena can fit together--not do fit together or should, but can with the pre-mised conditions satisfied. It also offers indispensable hypotheses, guidelines, and alternatives with which the policy worker can perceive and design possible policies for the myriad of unknown public problems to be confronted.

Certain subjects under the umbrella of economic theory are uniquely useful for the public policy student, but can too easily be ignored. These include theories in macroeconomics, international trade, monetary operations, economic systems, welfare, public goods, and development.

Another common core area of understanding is quantitative analysis and its technological counterpart--computer competence. It is the capacity to analyze and interpret the empirical component of the policy questions that makes quantitative knowledge so important. But its attempted substitution for theoretical understanding or for the creative, conceptualizing processes can result in a serious handicap to the policy worker.<sup>4</sup>

A third and final core area of understanding for all graduate students in rural social science, I will argue, is advanced study of public policy theory (Farrell, p. 785). Since all economic phenomena and private decision making in representative societies operate within the institutional framework set by public policy, it follows that the perceptiveness and analysis of all agricultural economists is affected by the adequacy of their understanding about public policy. It does not appear reasonable that a professional trying to develop predictive capacity about farm firms or market prices or agricultural trade should fail to comprehend one of the most persistent external forces, public policy.

The content of instruction in this area of public policy theory should focus upon theoretical issues of public policy--its logical foundations, its relation to economic theory, science, and other disciplines, its source of value or normative legitimacy, its reference to social value, externalities, and public goods, and its relation to economic and political systems. The content should also focus upon theories of the policy formation process.

Separate instruction is needed because these necessary theoretical underpinnings are too advanced for beginning policy courses, too low a priority for economic theory courses, and too complex to be adequately incorporated into a graduate course focused on a specific agricultural and food problem area. This is not to say that adequate<sup>study</sup>/of public policy theory could not be given within a problem oriented course, which usually emphasizes one or more of the policy areas of price and income, food distribution, environment, natural resources, land, rural development, credit, trade, or water. It could, but only if policy theory was as important an objective as the content of the problem area, and this is unlikely. Finally, we should realize that such understandings could be obtained in appropriate courses in fields other than agricultural economics, as economics, political science, community development, philosophy, etc.

Subject Matter Specific to Policy Graduates. For those students preparing for any of the several professional policy worker roles identified earlier, additional areas of understanding are needed. The needs include both subject matter content and analytical experience. They are met both by what is taught and how it is taught. They could be met in one carefully programmed course, but more likely in two. Three important areas of understanding are minimal.

1. Economic Trends and Situation. Competence is needed to develop, evaluate, and apply concepts and analytical tools designed to determine economic trends common to all major public policy problem areas, e.g., agricultural product supply, demand, prices, income, trade, resources, production and market structure, productivity, and the distribution of product and returns. Without this understanding, the policy worker is continuously handicapped in establishing research priorities, in designing relevant educational

programs, or in developing useful policy proposals. The worker needs to know what data are available, be able to evaluate it, have the ability to generate new data bases, and be capable of communicating it. A prime current example is agricultural trade where recent accurate trend intelligence is absolutely a prerequisite for policy work, i.e., knowledge not only of gross value of exports, but also net values, constant dollar values, quantity indexes, composition, and proportions of total production and trade, both domestic and world.

2. Policy Provisions and Implications. Competence is needed about the present public agricultural and food policy provisions, the previous stream of policies, and their economic consequences for the major sectors. These understandings are necessary for the policy worker to critically analyze and compare the economic content of policies in existence as well as those being proposed, and in particular, the capacity to perceive and develop innovative policies to public problems. For example, knowledge about the 1977 Act is necessary for effective future policy analysis in the food, price, and income area; the 1971 Act in the credit area, and the 1972 Act in the rural development area. And an amazing array of relevant literature is available, e.g., knowledge resources used in the 1977 period (Ill. Ag. Spec. Pub. 43; USDA Ag/Food Policy Review; U.S. Senate).

Critical understandings needed are the positive nature of policy analysis, the normative nature of policy decision making, and the importance of casting policy work in an alternatives framework. All policy students should have the broad spectrum of knowledge about public agricultural and food policies, including such diverse areas as education and research, price and income, food quality, trade, land, conservation, etc. It is not sufficient to be knowledgeable about only commodity programs, nor, of course, about only

trade or natural resources. The spectrum of issues is expanding; so must the competence of policy workers. In addition, at least one area should be studied in depth, approaching total comprehension, and that is usually the subject of the dissertation. The student's knowledge of these policies should be acquired through careful study and critique of ongoing policy research in these various problem areas, rather than total reliance upon textbook type descriptions.

3. Participatory Experience in Policy Analysis Dialogue. Competence is also needed about the interpretative, evaluative, creative characteristics of policy work. A policy worker is distinguished by an ability to critically evaluate policy research, existing public policy, and proposed policy; to independently critique them; and to systematically dialogue about them with others. Perhaps for many disciplines, and even some areas of agricultural economics, inadequacy in these abilities is only unfortunate, but for policy work it can be a serious deficiency. Although this competency can be developed if deliberately pursued in any of the previous courses of instruction, it probably necessitates a carefully designed, truly organized policy seminar. Here graduate students are the dominant actors, not as presenters of a hapless series of reports, but in an orchestrated instructional effort where they as future independent critical professionals are learning together and publicly to critique and dialogue about policy research and policy provisions.

I envision the course resources to be: 1. Selected policy research publications and serious well-designed policy proposals from the cutting edge of the policy field; 2. Policy graduate students themselves; and 3. An enthusiastic, even-handed teacher as organizer and intellectual catalyst. There is waiting a rich literature base in the national and regional professional journals, the proceedings of the annual National Public Policy Education Conference, and listings in the semi-annual Policy Research Notes.

III. Evaluation and Alternatives of Graduate Policy Education.

This evaluation of the adequacy of graduate policy teaching is not based on a survey of graduate teaching or programs in the policy field. Rather, it is distilled from personal experience of teaching policy at several institutions, from numerous discussions and exchanges of course syllabi with other teachers, and from extended interactions with policy workers in research and extension programs. Finally, it obviously emerges out of some of my own philosophy of education and concepts about the field of public policy. The evaluation will center on the understandings and knowledge previously identified in this paper as necessary competencies for policy workers (the grade point average used will range from A+ to D or fail).

Advanced Economic Theory. (Grade of A- on emphasis and course credit devoted to it; grade of B- on the distribution and breadth of subject matter.) Microtheory receives strong emphasis, which is useful to all but more appropriate to the specialties of farm or marketing firm analysis than to public policy. Macrotheory, probably the more useful for policy workers, receives second billing. Trade, monetary, economic systems, and development theory are comparatively short-changed.

Quantitative Analyses Skills (Grade of A-). Historically, policy work reveals a rather loose, conventional wisdom, lay language type of analysis and freely offered pronouncements from the elder statesman interested in the agricultural and food policy area. Now, quantitative capabilities are readily apparent in policy research. Carefully developed models with a range of capabilities are regularly used by USDA, several state research groups, and many private organizations to provide policy guidance. Every doctoral and most masters policy graduates now possess usable computer expertise. The



application of these quantitative abilities in policy work is another question to be more properly addressed along with other competencies and will not be graded here.

Public Policy Theory (Grade of C-, approaching failure). I believe there are serious deficiencies in the understandings of policy workers about the logical, scientific underpinnings of their conceptual framework, their approach in analysis, and their perception of the subject matter, public policy. I believe there is fundamental confusion about the positive and normative posture of the variety of professional roles in which they perform. I believe there is careless imprecision and indifference to important distinctions about the interrelations of political and economic systems, about governmental policy under different policymaking processes among different countries, and about public and private policy. I am not contending that the relevant disciplines, which could offer theoretical foundations, are very mature, nor that they have conciseness and consistency to offer. I am simply arguing that these important issues are not confronted in the arena of graduate policy education. As a result, the level of discourse and written record too often does not rise above that used in lay discussion, and much of our professional product is easily dismissed as simply a "viewpoint."

Economic Trends and Situations (Grade of B). Much basic national and international trend data are now available; it is increasing in quantity; and a likely future will be significant improvement in both quality and quantity. The difficulty is that continuous, consistent, current analysis and interpretation of critical trend data does not seem to be available nor adequately a part of graduate policy education. The intricacies of theory and quantitative expression crowd out this more elemental understanding of what is happening in our key variables and indicators. When it is introduced, it tends to be a particular analysis for a particular time period by

a member of our profession. Thus, a properly acclaimed productivity analysis a decade ago or a trade balance trend well documented for a selected few years provides inadequate understandings of these important trends over both the short and long run, including the last period for which data are available.

Policies and Implications (Grade of B+ on current and historical policy treatment; grade of C on alternatives). The literature is good on the evolutionary flow in most areas of agricultural and food policy. USDA and various Congressional office releases are readily available, relatively objective, and usually quite current.<sup>5</sup> This content of policy provisions appeals to most of us in the policy teaching game. What is tougher and probably more inadequately offered in graduate instruction is a systematic, even-handed, objective analysis of several relevant alternative public policies. If we approached policy instruction this way, it would provide vivid testimonial evidence that policy analysis and education is understood to emphasize dependable relationships and experience, not prescriptions and normative pronouncements of wise policy workers. This is not an easy step nor one many of us are willing to take. I suggest it is vitally important if our graduate students are to incorporate these competencies into a professional point of view.

Participatory Experience through Education (Highly unreliable grade, but believed to be close to failure.) Content crowds out methods of teaching. Published knowledge outranks experience of the learner. Tight course schedules put a premium on "covering all the material." We egotistical professionals rather naturally give priority to our personal review of the research piece or the policy, to our evaluation of its technical quality, and to our pronouncement of its merit. Yet, these are the very professional experiences

in an educational environment of professional critique and dialogue that our replacements need, i.e., our graduate students. They deserve more of the excitement of the strategy of scholarship, more of the fire of the professional battleground of ideas, and more of the challenge that can only come from the sting of temporary intellectual defeat. The capstone of graduate policy education should be a carefully planned, professionally taught policy seminar in which well over half of the critiquing of research and policy at the cutting edge is carried by our policy graduates, the policy workers of tomorrow.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV. Concluding Priority Needs for Graduate Policy Education

Graduate policy education is producing productive policy workers. The evidence is their performance in research, in public affairs, in undergraduate instruction, and in both private and public policy staff output. But it could and should be much stronger. Repeatedly, leadership of our profession has stressed in major addresses at these annual meetings the increasing role of public decisions in the affairs of the agricultural and food sector. I do not expect this trend to be reversed. The talents of the best minds, superbly educated with the priority competencies, are needed in the young policy workers for our profession and for our society as it sculptures its public policies of the future.

From this discussion, I have tried to identify the areas in graduate policy education most worthy of remedial attention. A low, marginal, or failing grade was found in three places: 1. course experience in the conceptual issues surrounding public policy; 2. well organized instruction in alternative policies for the public problems on our agenda; and 3. participatory experience in policy critique and dialogue through graduate policy seminars. This is where I suggest we start.

FOOTNOTES

1. On a tally of Presidential and Fellow Addresses at the annual meetings of this Association for the past five years, I record 50% definitely in the arena of public policy, and maybe even 60%. But, of course, this depends upon what one means by policy, about which more will be said.
2. Carroll Bottum, one of our Deans of public policy education concluded in his Fellows' Address in 1975, "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." (Bottum, p. 768).
3. This is a more detailed approach toward a similar goal as pursued by Jim Hildreth in his Presidential Address when he agreed that agricultural economists perform in one or more of three roles as "participants in decision making, as doers of subject matter analysis, and as doers of disciplinary analysis." (Hildreth, pp. 805-6).
4. Ken Farrell, while recognizing the merit of economics to develop, refine, and apply powerful quantitative tools, observed in his Presidential Address, "If we are to be criticized it is in having become excessively reliant upon quantitative methods while failing to emphasize the inherent limitations of required assumptions and dependent data systems, to invest in development of those systems, and adapt imaginatively our methods to consequential economic questions." (Farrell, p. 791).
5. The frequently updated chronology of Rasmussen and Baker (1979) is superb, USDA's new National Food Review offers a current source, and the voluminous literature surrounding the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 was partially cited in my recent AJAE article.
6. One of the more stimulating policy workers--and teachers--I ever knew admonished this Association in his Presidential Address almost two decades ago to encourage "an intellectual interest unbounded by blind devotion to any single social science discipline"; "minds that will probe the meaning of freedom, the relation of economics to ethics;" "the kind of thinking needed for institutional innovation." (Allen, p. 1018).

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