FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF EXTENSION ECONOMICS PROGRAM

By

John T. Woeste

John T. Woeste, Dean
Florida Cooperation Extension Service,
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida 32611

Paper Presented at the AAEA Meetings, Logan, Utah
Monday, August 2, 1982

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

OF

EXTENSION ECONOMICS PROGRAMS

John T. Woeste

Planning for the future can be a drama or a critical step to future success. The goals and commitment of the participants are the primary determinants of the outcome. A critical and open study preceding consensus on future targets render safe the unthinkable questions and threatening ideas.

Inviting a perspective from another discipline suggests a commitment to openly engage in the examination of targets or goals for the Extension Economics Program. Hopefully the foreign perspective will help the profession coalesce on those future targets.

Most of the references from agricultural economics materials are drawn from recent papers and publications. In so doing, the risk of discovering previously discarded concepts was increased. Should that occur, please be tolerant and critically consider the ideas. You may find an idea "whose time has come." Further, your indulgence is requested, should the content of your discipline be mishandled. If it occurs, it will be without malice of forethought.

Before attacking the assigned subject, a brief statement about frame of reference is important. Discipline or commodity Extension programs are viewed as a subset of the Extension program. They have an identity and a mission, however, their full potential can only be realized when they are integrated with the program efforts of other disciplines and commodity units. Having stated that caveat, special focus is placed on the economics program.

Relationship of Economics Extension to Economics Research

The most pressing and critical question is the knowledge base underpinning for the Extension Economics Program. Extension programming is the process of helping people use knowledge. The body of economic principles and concepts is, therefore, the underpinning for the Extension program. The relevance and relative power of Extension programs in the 80's, 90's, or whatever the time frame, will be largely dictated by the extent the program content includes the full scope of the existing knowledge base.

A model from another social science is useful in elaborating on the thesis. Zetterberg begins his book on "Social Theory and Social Practice" with: "One of the most appealing ideas of our century is the notion that science can be put to work to provide solutions to social problems. If eighteenth-century physics gave us the modern engineer to deal with technological problems, and nineteenth-century biology gave us the modern physician to deal with health problems, so twentieth-century social science dreams

that it will give mankind the social practitioner to deal scientifically with social problems." He went on to point out "...the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical action remains wide. When a client approaches an academic scientist with the phrase 'I have a problem...' he usually gets the answer, 'Let's do research about it....'" Zetterberg contrasted the social science response to the response of other fields with the example "When a patient approaches the physician or an industrialist approaches an engineer with the phrase 'I have a problem,' the response, 'Let's do research about it,' is not at all common. The physician and the engineer can, in most instances, rely on already codified knowledge to give help and advice. It is indeed ludicrous to think of a situation in which a contemporary engineer proposes to do research to discover the laws of mechanics when he is consulted about the building of a bridge or a situation in which a contemporary physician embarks upon a research program to discover insulin when consulted about diabetics....The fact that the social scientist says 'Let's do research about it,' signals his common inability to draw upon codified knowledge when faced with a new practical problem. We have competent researchers, but hardly any competent consultants." While we might debate the state of affairs in consultation and research, the suggestion that the implementors of the Extension program might appropriately be called "applied theoretical economists" emerges. Such a concept suggests a more systematic relationship between economic research and Extension Economics Programs. Zetterberg had additional advice that appears appropriate today. In his conclusions he

stated "... promotion of applied social theory need not rest on its possible advantages over applied social research. The phrase "nothing is as practical as a good theory" is a twist of an older truth: Nothing improves theory more than its confrontation with practice. It is my belief that the development of applied social theory will do much good to basic theoretical sociology. This is obvious enough as we deal with those parts of theoretical sociology that are put to practical use; they become refined in the process." He concluded further, "Practical application of social theory sets good standards for theorizing: it forces theorists to be at least reasonably precise; to stay in close contact with reality; and to have more than a technical vocabulary to offer when talking about social events."

These statements clearly define a case for the dependence of Extension upon research as well as the potential for expansion of our knowledge base when Extension and research are systematically intertwined. Such an interrelationship was also captured by Castle (p. 53) and by Horne who concluded, "One responsible for research must certainly know the present and potential problems that need attention. The more successful ones seem to possess a special vision that enables them to see into the future. A closeness to the Extension process may enhance this ability because progressive growers are quite perceptive" (p. 57).

Emerging is a diminishing of the sharp lines between Extension and research. Extension programs will be undergirded by economic theory and conducted in a manner that observations about the utility of the theory will be recorded and incorporated into

the base of economic knowledge. At the same time, the Extension programs must be an advocate for economic research (Anderson, p. 59). Any other posture serves to deny the lifeblood for the Extension Ecnomic Programs.

Relationship of Extension Economics to Extension Programs of Other Disciplines or Commodities

The relationship of the Extension Economic Programs with the other components of the Extension program merit attention. While specialized, narrowly focused program efforts have been and will continue to be effective, the emerging demands appear to be in the direction of increased multidisciplinary programming (Horne, p. 58; Lacewell and McGrann, p. 11). The clientele recognize that a single shift in a biological practice often affects overall performance of the enterprise. They understand the interrelationship of the various practices. Further, the large capital investments and low levels of profitability have spawned a keen sensitivity to risk in decision making. As a result, farmers and ranchers are requesting and in some cases demanding program content organized into farming and production systems. They want more than single lists of fragmented information. They are less willing to experiment with specific practice changes without an understanding of both the impact on the total crop or livestock system and finally, and most important for this group, the economic consequences involved. Will the change require more or less capital? Does it increase or decrease any risk? How will it affect cash flow and net returns?

The word "systems" has become a common concept in agricultural jargon. Look at the popular farm press, article titles and extensive articles about various production systems consume increasing space. Further, farm organizations have included the concept in their national policy programs. Most noticeable of recent events is the position of the National Cattlemen's Association. They have endorsed integrated reproduction management (IRM). In taking that action, they openly criticized agricultural research and Extension programs for being piecemeal, internally inconsistent, and falling short of the need to help farmers and ranchers apply the latest technology in the most effective manner. Fortunately, the Extension Economics Program has the capacity to address the clientele demands. The professionals conducting the program have the training to focus on relationships, corollary activity, and system analysis. Beyond the important input of economic principles and concepts, the Extension Economics Program must contribute to the content and structure of the total Extension program.

Admittedly, there are potentials for difficulty when developing a more "wholistic" education program. Certain individuals and in some cases departments and units will be obstinately territorial. Maintenance of turf or territory will become paramount to program goal achievement. A few biological scientists will profusely expound "bad economics." Those cases will test both your commitment to most effectively serving people through Extension programs and your leadership ability. Who will take the first step to work out conceptual differences? Unless the

Extension workers have the courage and conviction, the client is left to choose among conflicting information from trusted teachers and advisers.

Numerous obstacles to development and implementation of interdisciplinary Extension work have been identified. Factors of peer and administrative recognition, organizational barriers, and differences in conceptual framework were identified by Petrie and Swanson. Several activities such as the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) statement "the computer management power for modern agriculture" address the internal recognition and organizational questions, however, a most important source of motivation, the demands of the clientele, should not be overlooked. Their demands expressed through legislative and budgetary channels are very audible to administrators and generally to faculty. Important also is the relationships between the faculty and the clientele. Appreciation and respect resulting from satisfying the expectations of the clientele are important sources of motivation for Extension workers. Hopefully, these forces plus others supporting interdisciplinary Extension programming will outweigh the obstacles and increased interdisciplinary Extension programming can be anticipated.

Additional Issues Facing Extension Economics Programs

Assuming that the increased complexity and rapidity of change facing agriculture does not need discussion, the implications of these conditions should be addressed. High on the list of

concerns is the "maximum yield" syndrome. That syndrome appears to pervade the Land Grant System. Achieving maximum response is appropriate to satisfy scientific objectives. However, the farmer or rancher with an objective of profit and organizational survival may need a different level of technology to be successful. The cotton, grain sorghum and beef cattle examples cited by Lacewell could be repeated in a number of other states. Again, Economic Extension Programs must play a critical role. The output of production function analysis enables managers to make informed input substitutions and tradeoffs.

Your program clientele or target audiences must be identified. Farmers and ranchers are the first to come to mind. However, others must be identified and strategies developed to reach them. Credit agencies, governmental policy makers, university staff including Extension administrators, and colleagues in other departments must be considered. University and Extension administrators need the economic programs to address the emerging problems. The fossil fuel energy situation and the changing water supply have profound implications for what can be produced, how it can be produced, and where it can be most profitably produced. Your programs, emanating from your expertise, are central to addressing these problems. Without your input, administrators will be hard pressed to guide Extension programs and effectively lead rather than follow or tract the changing food and agriculture situation.

Many of the programs will demand a public policy education approach. Rather than recommendations, the identification of

alternatives and consequences will be addressed. Public issues such as water use, land use, public transportation, and environmental concerns will challenge Extension Economic Programs. Because decisions on such issues will impact a wide array of interest, clientele for the program will extend beyond farm people. Consumers, governmental officials, rural non-farm residents and businesses on main street have a stake in the decisions and will influence the final choice. The difficult task that must be addressed is how do we reach them. Perhaps approaching them through their existing channels of information and cooperatively with sources of information they accept as legitimate rather than directly approaching them will prove effective.

As for your colleagues, a biological scientist at the University of Florida recently stated "there is only one way to produce blueberries." Perhaps the statement could have been nearer correct if he had added "for me." The economics program must be an integral part of the process during the assembling of packages or bundle of technology to be recommended in the Extension program. Beyond the critical economic concepts, early involvement of your analytical and system building concepts can help to minimize the chances of clients experiencing such narrow perspective, single alternative, perscriptive programs.

Emerging communications and computer technology will play an important role in Extension Economics Programs. As computers enter the home, the "teachable" moment for a new level of management decision making will have arrived. The challenge will be providing the software that will prove valuable as they 'play'

with the new wonder machine. In addition, expanded opportunities to teach decision-making aided by the new technology will emerge. Abstract and allegedly 'dry' material can be turned into challenging games. The comment "Let's see what would happen if we changed the price of corn" seems to envoke a burst of enthusiasm and flurry of activity unparalleled in traditional farm management training programs as the farmer attacks the machine. Our challenge in the design of our program content and methodologies will be to capture that enthusiasm and involve the participant in a way that will be both motivating and beneficial.

If properly approached, the new technology should provide avenues for integration of biological and economic concepts into alternative systems. Model production systems can be quickly evaluated for productivity and profitability. Production of the programs or software packages can become the common goal guiding collaborative effort between the biological and the social science faculty members.

At another level, attention must be directed to the impact of computers and communications technology on institutional arrangements and structure. What will be the effect on the small communities as electronic purchasing, banking and selling emerge? Will the new technology effect market behavior, product pricing and the distribution of cost in the market? What should farmers, ranchers and agribusiness leaders do in response to the changes? If Extension Economics Program are designed to help people recognize problems and opportunities in contrast to reacting or responding to change, the clientele must be prepared to address

those questions through our programs. Further, as previously indicated, the vegetable, livestock and other Extension programs must include those concepts if they are going to lead rather than follow change.

Creating awareness or helping people recognize problems carries an element of risk. While the prudent administrator or faculty member carefully assesses the risk involved and employs strategies to keep it within acceptable limits, an element of risk appears essential to effective programs. The litany of complaints about our Extension programs include slow to change, slow to respond and traditional. Comments such as "too innovative," "ahead of the people served," or for that matter "overly aggressive" have not been among the popular accusations. Clearly the public response at this time suggests the need to be creative, innovative, and thus to take risk. Helping people recognize and evaluate new alternatives can be disquieting to them. It can also be threating to economic and social interest. If, however, we are going to fulfill our mission and earn the respect of the leadership, we must help them be masters of their fate.

Some of the risk can be reduced in the program planning phase of our effort. Too frequently, the concept of "readiness to learn" and "legitimation" are overlooked. Programs are launched and the widespread question emerges, "Why are they doing that?" or "Who asked for this?" And the response comes, "I thought it was a good idea." New and "good ideas" are important. In fact, they are essential to maintaining our leadership role. The important step, frequently overlooked, is helping others recognize the need

for the idea or concept. In many cases, effective program development has resulted in fiercely competitive groups agreeing that an educational program was desirable. Even if complaints and political pressures are directed toward the program, the expression of need by involved public groups provides useful rationale for the program effort. On the other hand, there are times when educational programs are not effective. Close working relationships with clientele groups will help the programmers read those situations. When they are observed, the effective programmer delays implementation until an appropriate time for educational programming effectiveness arrives.

Lastly, accountability, even as displeasing as it appears to faculty, must command a larger portion of our attention. Elected officials--county, state and federal--want a bigger voice in the expenditure of tax dollars. Public attitudes drive their disposition. Even our "friends" appear increasingly disposed to ask, "What are you doing?" "Why are you doing it?" and "What did you accomplish?" While Extension Administration answers many of those questions, the people designing, implementing and evaluating the programs can best formulate answers for those questions. If you have answers, and you consciously capture opportunities to answer either direct questions or help people understand the answers to the questions, Extension programs will have a substantially broader base of support from informed tax payers.

Some argue that increased attention to accountability will stymie risk taking behavior. Again, efforts spent in planning prior to launching educational programs can serve to reduce

faculty risk associated with programming. Prior recognition by the faculty and administrators involved that the clientele response may be poor or negative, or produce critical comments, provides the needed understanding for fair and objective evaluation at completion of the program. Similarly, programs planned with clientele provides the basis for increased concensus among the demands of "grassroots clientele, politicians, and administrators." Neither politicians nor administrators will persist in opposing the needs of the clientele.

From an organizational perspective, the situation was summarized by Anderson when he said, "Unfortunately, we have not done a good job of acquaiting the general public either with our priorities or the tremendous contributions made by our efforts. In arguing our case, we have often talked to each other rather than trying to build linkages with other groups. At times we have failed to speak collectively on behalf of the system and our rhetoric has done little more than cancel opposing views." The breath and strength of the support base should be the concern of each of us responsible for building public supported Extension educational programs.

Summary

A case was made for a strong tie with research so that the Extension Economic Programs reflect a solid underpinning of the research based principles and concepts. The economic principles

and concepts must be combined with biological science concepts into an interdisciplinary educational program. Feedback from Extension program clientele suggests an unwillingness to accept less.

Increased attention to production function analysis will provide a new array of management alternatives for clientele as well as identify research gaps in the knowledge base. Emerging electronic technology will play an important role in the program; opportunities to enhance interdisciplinary programs and create new levels of readiness for economic education will be for those who can develop motivating as well as valuable educational and decision making assistance software.

Educational programs that help people recognize emerging problems and opportunities are demanded if Extension desires continued public support. The public demand for accountability remains high; faculty and administrators have a responsbility as well as a professional stake in fulfillment of the demand.

FOOTNOTES

John T. Woeste is Dean of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Univeristy of Florida.

References

Anderson, James H., "Politics of Public Support of Research and Extension." Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies--1981. Farm Foundation, Oak Brook, Illinois, 1981, pp. 55-61.

Castle, Emery N., "How to Change Agricultural Research and Extension to Make It a Better Investment." Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies--1981. Farm Foundation, Oak Brook, Illinois, 1981, pp. 49-53.

ECOP Computer Task Force, The Computer Management Power for Modern Agriculture. Report prepared for the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, West Lafayette, Indiana, July, 1982 (to be approved).

Horne, Wendell C., "Extension: The Face of Plant Pathology." Ann. Rev. Phytopathol. 19(1981):51-67.

Lacewell, Ronald D., and James M. McGrann., "Research and Extension Issues in Production Economics." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Agricultural Economics Association, Orlando, Florida, 7-10 February, 1982.

Petrie, Hugh G., "Do You See What I See? The Epistemology of Interdisciplinary Inquiry." J. Aesthetic Educ. 10(1976): 29-43.

Swanson, Earl R., "Working with Other Disciplines." American J. of Agr. Economics 61(1979):849-859.

Zittenberg, Hans L., Social Theory and Social Practice. The Bedminster Press, New York, 1962.