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Generality Vs. Specificity in Agricultural Economics Academic Programs

James G. Kendrick

Members of departments of Agricultural Economics are rightly concerned as to how their graduates perform as they accept diverse responsibilities in a multitude of careers.

This concern about employers' opinions of our students has undoubtedly precipitated numerous, perhaps continuous review of departmental course offerings and requirements, consuming significant energies of both educators and employers. To neglect this effort would leave a department--our profession--in the stagnant waters of nonrelevancy.

However, I suspect that in many of these curriculum reviews considerable time is devoted to defining the academic qualities an agricultural economist should possess, and what functions he should be able to perform in various types of employment--firm, farm or public agency.

Employers have worked with these curriculum study groups to suggest profiles of training. Often the results of such studies could politely be termed excursions in frustration, as opposing visions of the "true" role of academia often find precious little upon which to agree.

This paper was presented in a session entitled "Preparing the Undergraduate for the World of Work: Industry or Academia?"

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Those agricultural economists concerned with the functioning of our graduates tend to mentally associate themselves with two philosophical camps--the specific and the general. I would suggest that the profession align itself with a different vision of its proper role in society which more accurately expresses what agricultural economists do best--systems analysis. As I will explain, employers as well as some members of our profession, are at times uneasy in the presence of systems people. If you can temporarily accept a working hypothesis that ag economists should neither be specialists nor generalists, I will now try to justify my heretofor implicit position which is now stated as: agricultural economists are illprepared to function either as technocrats or as global planners, yet are ideally suited for employment as applied systems-trained problem solvers.

I believe ag economists are most comfortable sitting between the extreme positions of specialists and generalists. When an employer hires a technocrat, a specifically trained individual like a lawyer, accountant, civil engineer, plant or animal breeder, etc., the individual is assumed to be able to perform his/her specialized duties with an absolute minimum of climatization. A remark from a personnel director handling specially-trained employees might be "When I hire an accountant and ask, 'Do you know what to do?' he responds 'yes' and does it."

Since the technocrat generally performs specific, pre-defined functions, it is somewhat unlikely that the specifically trained individual will suggest alternatives to present methods that might make waves and thus rock management's boat.

If the technocrat is not normally a wave maker, one might assume that the antithesis would be the generalist. I don't believe so. If typical liberal arts graduates could be classified as generalists, one might categorize their training as emphasizing the macro interrelationships of the total system and the interfaces that exist among general economic policy, political trends, historical perspectives and the business community. Often these generalists are able to provide accurate insights concerning long-run realignments in the total system and how those realignments will affect the relationships and profitability of the various subsectors of the economy. Such visions of the future may prove disquieting to management, but pose no immediate threat to current operational practices. Employers of generalists have been heard to lament, "When I hire one of those fancy trained college types, their heads are in the clouds and it takes a year or more of hard management training to make them understand how this business (farm, agency) operates and get anything productive out of them."

At the end of the training period, the generalist has learned how the firm (farm, agency) deals with issues of production, marketing, employment, etc., and is then integrated as a member of the "team," capable of directing sub-components of the farm (firm, agency) in concert with overall policy guidelines.

How does the applied systems-trained problem solver (ag economists are an example, I believe) differ from the specialist and generalist? I don't believe it is idealistic to suggest that the curriculums and other learning experiences at most departments of Agricultural Economics should

be designed to train students to: be integrators of specific disciplines; take perceived concepts or principles from one field and ascertain if the same principles or concepts exist unperceived in other fields and could be utilized to better quantify the consequences of alternative courses of action; view current operating procedures in a specific time-space environment which is subject to change as soon as these conditions are altered or new concepts of analysis are discovered and understood.

Duane Acker, our recent Vice Chancellor, hinted at the systems concept of agricultural economics a number of years ago when he described the difference between one trained in specifics compared to one schooled in integrating principles from various disciplines as follows:

In teaching our courses and in designing our curricula those of us in animal science or agronomy too often put the emphasis on stock being purebred rather than stock being efficient, or rations being nutritionally balanced rather than producing gains at lowest cost, or feedlots being designed for maximum saving of labor rather than being designed for lowest net cost of producing beef, etc. (Acker, pp. 276-7).

By designing our Agricultural Economics curriculums so that our students receive exposure to varied specific disciplines, exposure to the global perspectives of the generalists, and in-depth training to the applied analytical problem solving tools of economics, we thus produce a product that often approaches the traditional firm (farm, agency) training period with a different orientation than that of either the techno-

crat or the global planner.

When exposed to a firm's (farm, agency) current modis operanda, our systems-trained individual tends to become a victim of his/her past training by soon suggesting investigation into possible alternatives to present operational practices. Such suggestions for change by definition require alteration in existing procedures, which makes waves and thus may tend to make management a bit queasy. As examples of applied systems-trained problem solvers, ag economists may not be easily assimilated into an operation that traditionally has functioned with specialists, augmented by team-playing but frustrated would-be global planners. However, the systems individual can perform a function as valuable as the specialist or generalist for a firm (farm, agency) in the context of-- Do it this way for now (the specialist) while we explore near-term viable alternatives (the systems individual) and others speculate concerning how we will fit into the changing and dynamic society of the future (the generalist).

Employers who recruit ag economists expecting them to fill roles designed for specialists or generalists will tend to experience dissatisfaction in the employer-employee relationship. This dissatisfaction, this misunderstanding of the training of our typical agricultural economic applied problem solver is often manifested by suggestions for curriculum revision. If these suggested revisions are designed to produce specialists of the technocratic nature similar to the in-depth subject matter competence of an accountant, plant breeder, structural engineer, etc., I suggest that it would be preferable to hire the

technocrat directly. Similarly, if the suggested course revisions are designed to produce ag economists who are global planners, it would be better to concentrate recruiting efforts in the macro oriented areas of general economics, political science, philosophy, etc.

I do not mean to imply, however, that the misunderstanding of the role of ag economists is uni-directional. Assuming again that my concept of ag economists has possible merit, one observes that some departments seem to have designed training programs that attempt to emulate either the specialized training of technocrats or the global orientation of the generalists. At one extreme we observe the explosive proliferation of apprentice training programs and at the other extreme, a reverence of all training that emphasizes macro issues, preferably on a national or world-wide scale. I have never been convinced that just because ag economists have been reasonably proficient in utilizing a systems approach to applied problem solving, it automatically follows that ag economists are then eminently qualified as philosophers of general employment, national inflation, global resource allocations, etc. Neither are the biochemists, engineers, animal production specialists, etc. in danger of becoming unemployed due to massive intrusions by ag economists. When representatives of firms, farms or agencies suggest to an Agricultural Economics department curriculum committee that they "Leave unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," their counsel should be heeded.

In 1963 when I attended the teaching workshop in Bemidji, Boger defined the objectives of our profession as:

- (a) To understand and describe the environment in which farm products are produced, distributed and consumed, including agriculture's social and political institutions, its physical and human resources and the relevant value preferences of its people;
- (b) To refine and extend the principles of economics as they apply in the production, distribution and consumption of farm products;
- (c) To analyze opportunities for fuller attainment of public and private objectives through changes in the use of scarce resources available for production, distribution and consumption of farm products (Boger).

If the global political-economic forecasters are reasonably accurate, the remainder of this century might be categorized as becoming people-long and resource-short. For those of us concerned with the alternative organization of resources for efficient production and distribution of food and fiber, it would seem the task is of sufficient magnitude to allow ag economists ample opportunity to ply their trade without the necessity of enlarging the territory to encompass other academic disciplines.

The emerging popularity of "on-site" apprentice training for our students carries an implied assumption that we must train for specifics, not a systems approach.

When departments of Agricultural Economics find it necessary to add courses that mainly duplicate offerings in, for example,

sociology, general economics, political science, etc. then those departments have an inflated vision of the role of ag economics in society. I suspect that in some instances departments push for a profile of global courses because many of the staff feel uncomfortable with the tools of systems analysis.

I would encourage all of us--teachers, researchers, extension specialists and employers in the field of ag economics--to review carefully our proper role in a world that requires thoughtful evaluation of near-term alternatives for efficient production of food and fiber.

In my judgment, such a profession-wide review would too often reveal departments operating with a philosophy of curriculum structure that attempts to make agricultural economists synonomous with the total educational effort of the university. To attempt to be technocrats, global philosophers and analysts of alternatives to applied problems is a lot to ask of any profession--even agricultural economics.

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