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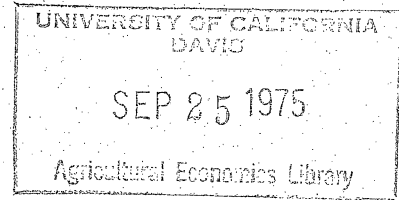
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*Agricultural
Economics
Aspects
C*

1975



Contributed Paper---AAEA Meetings
Monday, August 11, 3:15 p.m.
Group XIV: General Agricultural Economics

ECONOMIST TRADE-OFF: CAN AN ACTION AGENCY
ECONOMIST FIND HAPPINESS IN ACADEMIA

ABSTRACT

Experiences gained in personnel exchange program between land management agency and land grant university are described and evaluated from perspective of agency economist. Professional activities within university environment are contrasted with those in government setting. Beneficial and adverse aspects of exchange are assessed in terms of exchanges, institutions and students.

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*Presented at AAEA Annual meeting,
Columbus, Ohio, Aug. 10-13, 1975*

ECONOMIST TRADE-OFF: Can An Action Agency

Economist Find Happiness in Academia?*

Jack D. Edwards**

Introduction

Economists spend a great deal of time gathering data, analyzing it with sophisticated tools and drawing inferences for trade-off evaluations of alternative courses of action. Their analyses are usually developed for firms, industries, interest groups or government agencies. This paper strikes closer home and forces the economist to apply the tools of his trade to a personal evaluation of his professional activities under two quite distinct institutional arrangements--the Federal government and the university. It draws from my recent experience in a short-term government-university personnel exchange program and forms the basis for this article.

The nature and general requirements of the exchange are described to furnish readers with a better understanding of the program. Contrasts and commonalities in professional activities are evaluated within the context of the academic and governmental environment. Beneficial and adverse effects of the exchange experience are assessed in terms of the institutions and individuals. Major contributions of the program are summarized and salient recommendations for improving future exchange programs are highlighted in the concluding sections.

*Paper for presentation at American Agricultural Economics Association Annual Meeting, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, August 10-13, 1975.

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Nature of Exchange Program

During the Spring Semester of 1973, the Bureau of Land Management, Denver Service Center, and the University of Nevada - Reno, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, entered into a short-term exchange under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act of 1970. Individual participants were a resource economist on the University of Nevada staff and a BLM resource economist (the author of this paper).

My primary responsibility was instruction of university classes in Land Economics and Economics of Water Resource Use, with limited monitoring of ongoing research in this field and other staff assignments. The university economist was involved in a variety of short-term assignments, where his expertise could be utilized and which would provide insight into the operational role of economists in a land management agency. These included participation in a multidisciplinary team effort to develop an environmental impact statement, economics training program for field personnel, consulting on field application of economics to land use planning problems and exposure to systems and procedures development to support the public land management mission.

Salary and fringe benefits for each participant were covered by their respective home institutions. This tends to minimize costs and administrative actions associated with the exchange and precludes any break in fringe benefits. Participants also exchanged houses and second cars as a means of reducing personal costs. For most university assignments the government exchangee would have to meet requirements for the corresponding academic position to be eligible for adjunct academic faculty

status. The university exchangee would be expected to meet Civil Service standards for the government position.

Exchanges consummated under the Act are predicated on the notion that the long run benefits to the cooperating institutions will exceed the short-term costs. There is also an underlying assumption that the experience will tend to enhance the professional capabilities of the individuals involved, thus contributing to the initial objective. Students actually stand to benefit most from this type of program. Initially, they obtain first hand illustrations and applications of theoretical constructs to real world problems, as well as realistic job counseling from the government practitioner. Over the longrun, the returning university professor brings a more relevant bag of examples to the classroom and a broadened perspective for counseling students on employment opportunities and research needs.

Institutional Attributes

My personal observations represent a case study evaluation of the exchange experience rather than definite patterns or trends drawn from analysis of a series of exchanges. Another individual would undoubtedly touch upon other issues and arrive at somewhat different conclusions. This section contrasts basic attributes influencing the working environment of economists with the two institutions.

Time Frame. The University normally takes a longer run stance in accomplishing its teaching and research mission compared to the relatively shorter time-tables surrounding most government projects and programs.

The government can often compensate by bringing several disciplines from other offices or agencies to bear on a problem or study, whereas departmental barriers inhibit multidisciplinary research efforts with continuing emphasis on the traditional major professor-graduate student approach to research.

Scope. A federal land management agency works within a broad national policy framework augmented by strong regional inputs from user, environmental and special interest groups. The University is more concerned with statewide issues and local problems of its constituency. However, some of the provincial aspects of research applications are offset through regional research projects as well as in the teaching program which emphasizes general theory, principles, policies, and concepts.

Organization. The bureaucratic hierarchy within the university and government are similiar in terms of the multi-layer of administration or supervision. A line management agency with geographically dispersed field offices must rely more heavily on written directives and procedures, whereas a university situated on a single campus can conduct much of its business through committee meetings and personal contact. Universities are more inclined to group disciplines (i.e., economists) organizationally by departments. In a land management agency such as BLM, economists would more likely be attached to a Planning Staff or a Resource Staff such as Minerals.

Professional Measures. The traditional measure of professional achievement in academia is the length of the publication list and academic rank while the size of staff, office space, magnitude of program and grade level

serve as prime measures of success in government. While these criteria remain in force, more emphasis is being placed on quality of instruction in the university and quality of performance in government as measured by achievement of management objectives. Universities encourage publication while action agencies generally discourage, either implicitly or explicitly, the presentation and publication of professional papers. Thus, "publish or perish" continues as a major determinant within the university while "publish and perish" is becoming the rule of the game for professionals within resource management agencies.

Role. With a reward system pegged to publications, it is not surprising that research, often times addressed to the wrong questions, or with results too late to shape policy decisions, continues to absorb a disproportionate amount of university professional resources usually at the expense of teaching. The government economist (in a land management agency) is more likely to be making direct application of his analytical tools to resource management problems, planning, environmental impact statements, and program evaluation. Most of these agencies also utilize a few economists in regional centers to develop guidelines, procedures, and systems, present training and furnish technical assistance to line offices.

Individual Perspective

From an individual standpoint, exchangees are placed in a different working and living environment and must relate to new work assignments, people, and situations. This type of change can be professionally rewarding when it results in exposure to new ideas and alternative approaches for

problem solving. In the university setting, these changes can be triggered through contacts with students, faculty, seminars, library resources, etc. In government (especially regional offices), the visiting professor is exposed to a broad range of policy issues with varying degrees of impact on geographic regions, interest groups and resource conflicts.

For the government economist, it affords an opportunity to personally explore the other side of the fence to see if the "halls of ivy" are really as green as they seemed as a student, or whether, upon closer scrutiny, they are merely an illusion. The same holds for the university economist, who in most cases has had even less exposure to the internal operation of the government agency. Due to the transitory nature of the exchange this evaluation can proceed in a rather objective fashion. At the same time, both exchangeers are, either consciously or unconsciously, analyzing the positive and negative aspects of the job they left behind from a more distant perspective.

The old adage, "out of sight, out of mind", operates to some extent in an exchange situation and should be recognized by the individual participants. In some cases this could mean a temporary delay in a promotion or missing recognition for earlier input into a project completed during the exchange period. In other instances it may mean recognition of the stark reality that your home institution can continue to operate quite effectively in your absence.

Program Evaluation

Several of the beneficial and adverse effects of the exchange program on the individuals and institutions have been spelled out. In the final analysis, overall program impact must be perceived from the viewpoint of the individual economists, their peers, the students, their supervisors and their respective institutions.

From my perspective, I would offer the following overall assessment of the program:

(1) It furnished first-hand information of the professional work of counterparts in other institutions, and contributes to closing the credibility gap associated with our major institutions today.

(2) It brings experience and applications to the university classroom and an exchange of expertise to cooperating institutions.

(3) It can be disruptive to long-term research projects within the university or developmental efforts in government. Advance planning can offset some of the adverse effects.

(4) The professional experience gained, exposure to new ideas and fresh approaches to solving emerging problems upon returning to the home position should more than offset job disruptions and personal dislocations.

Recommendations

A bottom up approach works best for individual match-ups for the exchange. In other words, there needs to be general agreement among the exchangees

and their families and their immediate supervisors on the desirability of the exchange, the location, timing and the nature of the work assignments. This provides a firmer basis for negotiating the final exchange agreement. Specific work assignments and supervisory relationships should be spelled out as specifically as possible in the exchange agreement to insure program needs are met and to avoid misunderstanding.

Long range planning is important to accommodate on-going work assignments, to meet target dates and provide exchangees with some advance preparation for their new assignment. A semester is about right for the teaching assignment, but too short for meaningful involvement in a research project. This would generally hold for the government assignments -- five months is adequate for orientation and short-term projects but would be limiting for longer range development work.

One-way exchanges can be accommodated under the Act, but benefits of the two-way exchange overshadow the single situation. The two-way exchange brings both institutions and individuals into the experience on an equal partner basis, plus it provides each office with an economist in their respective position during the exchange period.

The costs to the cooperating institutions and individuals appear relatively low when compared with the significant and far reaching benefits accruing from the program. Based on our initial experience with the exchange program, we feel it could be shaped to serve as an effective vehicle for accomplishing other related objectives. For example, furnishing faculty

expertise to universities, with sizeable minority enrollments, to develop resource management curriculums and administer work-study programs would reflect positive commitment towards Equal Employment Opportunity programs. Walking awhile in the other person's shoes is one of the best ways of gaining an appreciation and understanding of the problems and opportunities of his job and institution.