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PREPARING THE UNDERGRADUATE FOR THE WORLD OF WORK:

PERSPECTIVE FROM THE MEAT PACKING INDUSTRY

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Oscar Mayer & Co.
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AAEA 1975 ANNUAL MEETING

PREPARING THE UNDERGRADUATE FOR THE WORLD OF WORK: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE MEAT PACKING INDUSTRY*

The Agricultural Economic Association in its annual program and in its official Journal has given considerable platform in the last decade to the general topic under discussion at this meeting. As recently as one year ago at the Annual Meeting of the Association, our Chairman today chaired a session "Interfacing the Classroom and the World of Work" which included two fine papers by Milton Snodgrass (1974) and Charles French (1974). They discussed the issues of whether and how to bring the undergraduate student to the "real world" and the "real world" to the student.

In their discussions I thought Snodgrass (1974) and French (1974) laid an excellent philosophical framework for our discussion today. Snodgrass (1974) stated that "During a period of study leading to a baccalaureate degree, most agricultural economists would likely agree that a student should develop a capacity for: (1) critical analysis and problem solving, (2) taking a responsible position in society, (3) forming a philosophy of life - living harmoniously with one's self, other people, and the physical world, and (4) continuing one's education. Using more

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general categories, the objectives of a university education might be considered to fall into two groups: the first pertains to individual development for self-understanding and fulfillment, good citizenship, and living harmoniously with other people and the physical environment, and the second involves career education which includes the component of developing some employable skills. In curricular discussions among agricultural economists, there are wide variations among the percentage emphasis that each of these two areas should receive."

French (1974:1163) stated that in the four years of undergraduate study that teachers "have a huge job to get across the general ideas of (1) developing the discipline of thinking; (2) conceptualizing with various degrees of abstraction the situations within which analysis by thought or otherwise takes place; and (3) bringing to bear the wisdom of the past, theoretical generalizations, analysis techniques, and means of creativity on problems of working and living."

Thus, the student is being prepared for the "problems of working and living" and the question is what is "the percentage of emphasis that each of these two areas should receive?"

Snodgrass (1974) poses one of the issues we are to discuss today. How much of the four years of undergraduate education in agricultural economics and business management should be devoted to "individual development for self-understanding and fulfillment, good citizenship and living harmoniously with other people and the physical environment" and how much to "career education which includes the component of developing some employable skills." And I am sure that this is not a new subject to any of you. I am sure that each of you involved in teaching or the administration of departments involved in teaching has directed much

energy and thought to this matter. As I noted earlier, the American Agricultural Economics Association has given considerable time to the subject in its meetings and space to the subject in its Journal. Three years ago, a special three-day Workshop (AJAE:1973) on the Improvement of Education in Agricultural Economics was held by our Association at the University of Florida. This Workshop focused attention on many matters, including our subject today. Thus, it is presumptious of me to think that I can add significantly to the body of knowledge that we have accumulated in this area. However, according to our Chairman, interest in and arguments about the subject continue brisk and I am most happy to be a part of your discussion today.

Most holders of undergraduate degrees in Agricultural Economics and Business Administration enter the meat packing industry in one of three general capacities - production, sales, or livestock buying. Some others enter into other specialized staff areas associated with marketing, procurement, finance, personnel, industrial engineering, and others.

When we recruit undergraduates we hope to obtain persons who will have, of course, promotability to management positions but also flexibility and mobility. Therefore, we opt for students who have a good, broad, general background in subject matter. However, I do not mean so general that the curriculum has been disjointed and nearly completely elective. If the student is an agricultural economics or business management graduate, we would expect a good, solid selection of courses within the major. But we would also look for good coursework in the sciences and would be very impressed with good work in communications. In our particular industry, we would be delighted with a solid minor in meat and animal science. In other parts of agribusiness, a different

agricultural minor might be more appropriate but I would think similarly desirable.

From the viewpoint of the total welfare of the graduate, I believe that a reasonable compromise between a general background and specific courses developing specific employable skills is desirable. It is asking quite a bit to choose at age 19 or 20, one's life-work. Keeping one's options open as long as feasible seems to be in the student's self-interest and also in the collective best interest of society. Having an optimum "fit" between the person and the occupation should improve not only the total output of goods and services per unit of input, but also the more difficult-to-measure other-than-economic standard of living of the population.

However, there is a reasonable limit to how long and how much luxury we can have before choosing our productive occupation. It seems reasonable to expect that during the undergraduate days that a student be expected to develop skills that will make him or her productive and contributive to his or her and others welfare almost immediately upon graduation. And in our firm, and in the others with whom I have spoken in preparing for this discussion, we expect the student to be able to enter productive employment with relatively little initial training by the firm.

With the exception of positions requiring specialized professional skills such as engineering, accounting, chemistry, law, etc., and other positions requiring particular and specialized experience or training, we do not attempt to hire for particular divisions of our company students of particular coursework or curriculum. We believe that the fundamentals are about the same. To be able to sell or to buy or to manage a working

crew or to function well in most positions, one must be able to think and analyze quickly and clearly, to make correct judgments and to communicate quickly and effectively with others. One must be able to anticipate, recognize and analyze important occurrences, problems and opportunities, decide the optimum course of action, communicate the decisions and reasons for them to others, and perhaps lead but at least work well with others to carry out the decided upon course of action. Personality and other characteristics and the preferences of students for the different kinds of positions, we believe, are more important in their placement than the differences in their coursework.

There are some trends in the "World of Work" that you are very aware of but which may bear repeating. The body and complexity of knowledge required continues to multiply. Changes of all kinds increase rapidly. The interdependence of nations, industries, firms in a supplier-user relationship and persons within a productive group is increasing. This means that employees must either know more or, more importantly, know how to know more. The problems, opportunities and decisions are likely to occur more frequently with faster change. And the need for effective and speedy communication becomes greater and that which is communicated becomes more complex.

These trends lead us to the increasing importance of education. It is important to employees and to employers more than ever before. And I agree with French (1974:1173) who last year said that "professors know more about education than employers" and the "many general items expected by the employers of the student can be taught best by the professor." Better education is required in today's "World of Work" and the good university is the most effective and should be the most

efficient place for it to be done.

These trends in the "World of Work" that were mentioned a moment ago also lead us to the needs in education from the employer point of view. We demand a lot from the educator. We are asking for a product that not only will not depreciate in five, seven, or ten years like many of our other inputs, but one that will appreciate and remain effective for forty or more years in a fast-changing environment. Thus, it is more important to produce a product or graduate that is capable of changing and learning and growing than a product for a particular task in a particular time frame. It is more important to produce a graduate who can efficiently find and comprehend pertinent information for the next forty years because the quantity and importance of the new knowledge and information developed during the next forty years will be greater than all that is now known. In addition, in today's and tomorrow's interdependent world, more and more goods and services are and will be produced and marketed by specialists working together so that the need to communicate information and ideas effectively grows steadily.

With these trends, it seems apparent that the formal education of the student must be somewhat general. Those who move up the corporate ladder most rapidly tend to be those who gained considerable breadth either in formal education or in continuing education while on the job.

However, the realism in the "World of Work" is also such that in the vast majority of cases one must produce something of value fairly rapidly. In today's competitive market it is likely that one must have marketable skills. I think education is called upon to strike that balance and I think that such a balance well serves the student, the employer and society.

In his excellent communication to us in preparation for this meeting, the Chairman suggested several areas of discussion on more specifics in the what-to-teach and how-to-teach in "preparing the undergraduate for the World of Work." I believe that you educators know more about the how-to-educate and it is presumptious for me to think that I can add greatly to your store of knowledge in this area. However, I do want to respond to the Chairman's questions and suggested list of topics. To help me in doing this, I interviewed and discussed this subject with some of our employees, all graduates of departments in agriculture schools within the last decade or so. They have all entered our company through one of three training programs, the Pre-Management Training, Operations Training or Sales Training Programs. They have worked and progressed with our company since their graduation. This is not an adequate-sized sample nor is it random and therefore cannot be necessarily representative. They are not all graduates of Departments of Agricultural Economics. But they do represent examples of products of instructions of agricultural college departments who are working in industry.

I asked questions concerning the curriculum - what has been of greatest use, least use? What would you have liked to have added, deleted? What kinds of instruction were most valuable - lectures, case studies, field trips, visiting lectures, special programs and reports, computer games, etc.? What was the relative value of extracurricular activities on campus? Should they be increased or decreased? Would you have liked to have had more specific preparation for the "World of Work?"

It is difficult to gain any particular consensus from such a relatively small number of conversations. However, some tendencies did emerge. Most were fairly happy with their undergraduate training and

clearly could name more courses they would like to have taken than courses they would like to have deleted. They agreed with Dr. French (1974:1173) when he said last year that "four years is preciously short."

All would like to have taken more work in decision analysis. Some mentioned that they would like to have had more commodity demand and supply analysis including futures markets. Most would have liked to have had more accounting. All expressed that they would liked to have had either more coursework in speaking and writing, or much better yet, more experiences in speaking and writing worked into their various courses of study. Comments were made on the importance of being able to sell oneself, one's products or services, or one's ideas, verbally or in writing, and being unprepared by undergraduate experience to do so effectively. The ability to analyze and define a problem and opportunity and various courses of action quickly and possibly on one's feet at short notice was deemed necessary in industry and not prepared for properly in undergraduate studies.

There were mixed reviews for many of the various methods of instruction but most favored more case study approaches to coursework. They also favored more use of special problems, projects and papers. They desired as much simulation of the environment of corporate decision-making as possible. However, there was no strong feeling that computer games were the best approach. Regarding computers, most thought that the undergraduate should get a thorough understanding of the capabilities, value and use of computers in business but saw no reason to invest very much time learning the intricacies of programming.

In summary, the graduates I talked with who have worked with us felt that they had received a good education, a good background and

adequate training for the "World of Work" in agribusiness. They realize that not all graduates go to work for business firms and that a collegiate curriculum cannot be designed for such graduates alone. They realize that some students change their minds on career choices several times during undergraduate days and that considerable breadth must be maintained to permit such mobility. But with the ability of hindsight and with the perspective of employment in an agribusiness firm, most would have desired more work in courses helping to improve analyses of problems, decision-making processes and various methods of communications. Most now say that they wish there had been more use made of the case study method and more opportunity for the student to develop analyses, decision-making and communication skills in coursework and/or in extracurricular activities on campus.

As an employer, I believe we are looking for individuals who have leadership ability, a desire to work, an ability to work with others, and an ability to break down a problem and opportunity, arrive quickly at an appropriate course of action and communicate to others the action and reasons for it. We would like the breadth of educational background which permits the employee to see the broad and interlocking pieces of corporate and industry operations and hence, makes him more promotable to levels of broader responsibilities. Yet, we also like the employee to come to us with useful and marketable skills which permit almost immediate productivity. We would like an employee who knows more about how to obtain information than he knows about how to memorize information. We would like an employee with a life-long commitment to continuing personal education and improvement because some of one's formal education and training tends to be forgotten or becomes obsolete over time.

Having said all of this, I can understand Dr. French's (1974:1163) observation last year that he was "patently unimpressed with the product specifications for recruiting undergraduates laid out by many employers. Usually the employer wants a student with a list of personal, professional, and environmental characteristics never embodied in one young person. Professor and employer are both ill-advised to expect a student to be all things to all people." I agree with Dr. French but such a product specification is still useful as a goal, even if seldom attainable.

Last year, Dr. Snodgrass (1974) and Dr. French (1974:1169) reported on cooperative study programs, called "cooperative" or "intern" programs. Our experience with these is generally favorable with proper planning and if used in certain departments. We have had some successes with them and are slowly expanding them in selected areas.

French (1974:1168) also analyzed field trips and visiting lecturers. Our experience leads us to conclude that in economics and business management, it is better and more efficient to bring the business manager or the business economist to the classroom or club than the students and professor to the business location. I agree with Dr. French (1974:1168) that the visitor should not lecture but should respond to the students' and professors' questions and comments. In that way, the subject matter covered will be that desired by the teacher in designing the course. It is my feeling that business managers will normally respond favorably to invitations to campus classes and club meetings if the number of hours spent there with students per trip is sufficient to justify the use of the total time invested.

My experience and my contacts with others in our company and industry in preparing this paper leads me to conclude that a moderate

stance is best on the question of an extremely broad versus extremely narrow undergraduate education in preparation for a career in business. The risks of either extreme are too great to the student and to society.

Regarding the question of methodology, I believe that your departments are keeping up with technology and are keeping up with surveying employers and your graduates in efforts to increase the productivity of your instruction. My experience and observations lead me to agree with almost all of the observations made by Drs. French and Snodgrass at these meetings last year and I would suggest that if you have overlooked or missed these articles that you try to review them.

Finally, we in industry are indebted to the fine efforts you are making with our young people to prepare them for the "World of Work" as well as the world of living. Much will be demanded of them in both worlds. The preparation of them to meet these demands is an important trust which you have. Dr. French (1974:1173) put it very well when he stated that you should selfishly cherish and defend your short exposure to your students.

We thank you for trying to do better a most important task.

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