

**JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS  
AT NON-LAND GRANT COLLEGES**

by

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Staff Paper 97-14

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**Dept. of Agricultural Economics**

**Purdue University**

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# **JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS AT NON-LAND GRANT COLLEGES:**

## **Results of a Survey**

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### Abstract

This paper provides information about the nonagricultural academic job market to students and administrators in Agricultural Economics departments. Particularly, we report the results of a survey sent to 295 non-Land Grant economics departments which met our criteria of offering only a Bachelor's degree in Economics. Of the 101 returned surveys, 45% indicated that they would consider hiring an Agricultural Economist to fill a faculty position within their department. These schools indicated that they place greater value on teaching-related experiences than research publications in prospective faculty members. We propose the implementation of mentoring programs within Agricultural Economics departments. Such programs would allow students to learn valuable teaching skills from a respected professor with a well-established teaching program.

Keywords: Academic job market, agricultural economist, economics, teaching

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# **JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS AT NON-LAND GRANT COLLEGES: RESULTS OF A SURVEY**

by

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## **Introduction**

Graduate students in Agricultural Economics have a common goal: getting a job. This objective often leads to a set of questions for their advisors. These include: What skills do I need to achieve success in my field? What experiences outside of the classroom can I participate in to make me more valuable to potential employers? What are my options when I receive my degree? If I don't get a research position, can I teach Economics at a non-Land Grant institution?

These types of questions are common to all students at every level of every discipline. There is always uncertainty that arises concerning the future. No exception is made for graduate students in Agricultural Economics programs.

The uncertainty faced by Agricultural Economics graduate students is exacerbated by the current state of the discipline. The health and survival of Agricultural Economics has been discussed in several *CHOICES* articles in the past few years. Paarlberg (1992) predicted that agricultural disciplines will be absorbed into their parent disciplines' departments within each Land Grant university. However, in 1995, two articles in this journal revisited this topic and arrived at a potentially more optimistic prediction for Land Grant universities and Agricultural Economics departments.

## **Two Distinct Markets**

Christenson et al. (1995) discussed what they call the "necessary response" of every university in today's dynamic labor market. The increase in the number of individual career changes resulting from technology advancements means that many individuals will need additional education later in life. According to these authors, the Land Grant universities have an advantage because they have been leaders in cooperative extension. Although this is a positive point for the survival of Agricultural Economics departments, much of this need may be met through distance learning and may not lead to the employment of additional Ph.D.s.

Dobson (1995) suggested that there are mechanisms that might allow Agricultural Economics departments to survive the current cuts in public funding and to position themselves to avoid the fate predicted by Paarlberg. One of his suggestions was to market the Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics

as an applied economics degree. Dobson maintains that the market for applied economists is perceived as being distinct from the market for Ph.D. Agricultural Economists. In fact, Dobson refers to the title “Agricultural Economics” as restrictive. He concludes by recommending that each department specialize to a certain degree to meet a particular demand niche for applied economists. His perception is that the markets for agricultural or applied economists are no longer a single market.

### **Student Anxiety**

Obviously, our field of study is somewhat in a state of flux. This uncertainty often means increased anxiety for current graduate students. The student can reduce the uncertainty in a number of ways. An excellent way to lower stress when searching for employment is to increase options by acquiring skills and experience to make oneself attractive to a broader market of additional employers or an increased number of demand niches.

As students and faculty are aware, there are many potential options (e.g., government, industry, private consulting) in addition to employment in an Agricultural Economics department. However, one avenue that is seldom mentioned is that of a position in an Economics department in a smaller, liberal arts university where undergraduate education is emphasized. The perception of many students and professionals in our discipline appears to be that these nonagricultural schools will not normally hire Agricultural Economists and they are, therefore, a very thin market for Agricultural Economists. This study tests the validity of that perception.

### **Explanation of Study**

This study was motivated by questions raised by graduate students who desire to pursue teaching as their major area of responsibility and anticipate fewer positions at Land Grant universities. A position at a smaller liberal arts university would allow those students to pursue their desires, but the potential for such teaching employment is unknown. This emphasis on teaching is not to downplay the importance of research in academics but to examine options. As shall be shown later, the necessity of research productivity is a reality at all academic institutions. Therefore, the student who finds a 100% teaching appointment will likely also find an expectation for some level of research activities. This study presents the prospects for employment in this market and what attributes the student needs to acquire for employment in a small, liberal arts school.

The *United States College Blue Book*, which was used to obtain our sample, listed 647 universities that met the criteria of offering a B.S. or B.A. in Economics but no advanced Economics degrees. We randomly selected 295 of these schools and sent a questionnaire to each department's chair or head; 101 surveys were returned, providing a response rate of 33%. Examination of respondents versus nonrespondents yielded no systematic differences and we concluded that the sample of 101 is representative of the population.

## **Results<sup>1</sup>**

The responses were somewhat surprising. The most surprising was that 45% of the respondents, hereafter referred to as Economics departments, indicated that they would hire an individual with a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics. This is strong evidence that this market may represent a viable employment opportunity for Agricultural Economists.

However, the responses suggest that these Economics departments demand a set of skills and experiences in which teaching credentials are perceived as being of much greater importance than is research productivity. Figure 1 shows the relative importance placed on seven separate activities by the Economics departments that responded positively to hiring Agricultural Economists. The higher the number, five being maximum, indicates that the Economics department feels strongly that its potential hires have had this experience.

The numbers presented in Figure 1, when compared with the responses from Economics departments indicating they would not hire an Agricultural Economist, are slightly greater in all categories, except "Paper Presentation" and "Refereed Article." The results show that those who responded positively to hiring Agricultural Economists tend to weight refereed articles evenly with other types of publications. On the other hand, those who responded negatively tend to place greater weight on refereed journal articles than on other types of publications.

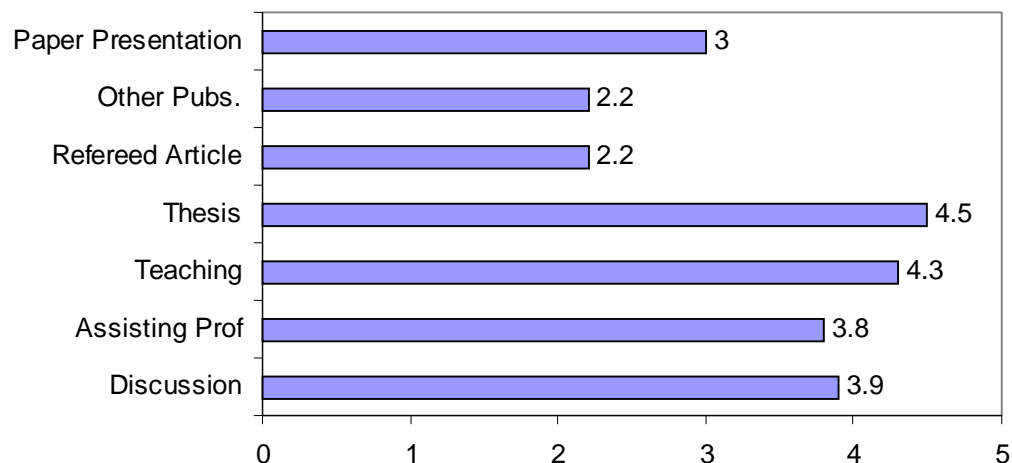


Figure 1. Relative Importance of Academic Activities

Figure 1 shows that Economics departments put a relatively higher weight on teaching activities than research activities, although nearly all require thesis completion. While not surprising, since the group surveyed is primarily involved in undergraduate teaching, the relative strengths suggest a very different employment market compared to Land Grant universities. However, 85% of the department heads responding stated that they expect research to be performed by their faculty members.

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<sup>1</sup> The results presented in this section are taken from those respondents who indicated they would hire an Agricultural Economist.

## **Need Teaching Skills**

Figure 1 also suggests that to be successful in obtaining employment in this market, Agricultural Economics Ph.D.s should have experience in the classroom and develop their instructional skills during graduate studies. While leading a recitation ("Discussion") group or assisting a professor with a course (probably grading papers or holding office hours to answer questions) is desirable, it is more advantageous to have had full responsibility for preparing and teaching a course, as evidenced by the higher weight on "Teaching" in Figure 1. Publishing articles ("Other Pubs." or "Refereed Article") of any sort ranks substantially below teaching-related activities. "Paper Presentation" ranks slightly higher than publishing, suggesting an emphasis on communication skills.

The survey also shows that the typical Economics department represented by these respondents employs nine individuals, with seven or eight of those being full-time faculty members. These are much smaller departments than most Agricultural Economics graduate students are accustomed to and may lead to decreased interaction between professional colleagues due to a smaller human-resource base.

Among the responding departments, the typical faculty member teaches four different courses each year (i.e., completely different course titles). Each faculty member is also responsible for six to seven class sections each year. This suggests that the faculty member teaches at least one course to multiple class sections. Thus preparation, grading, and advising may leave little time for research, at least on the scale that graduate students are exposed to during their Ph.D. experience.<sup>2</sup>

## **Economics Market Potential**

Although most of the previous information may be encouraging to those interested in such a position, we have shown only that Economics departments would consider hiring an Agricultural Economist and that the job is likely a full-time position. We have not addressed the key concern: Will opportunities exist in the marketplace?

Forty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they intend to fill at least one position within the next five years. Generalizing to the population, this translates into a minimum of 134 openings in Economics departments that would consider employing an Agricultural Economist. An additional 39% responded that they may be filling a position but were unsure at that time. If each of these indeed hires, then an additional 114 positions would potentially be available within the next five years. This would mean that at least 27, and possibly as many as 50, Agricultural Economists could be hired in this market per year.

Approximately 176 Agricultural Economics degrees were conferred each year between 1991 and 1995. Assuming these numbers to be representative of the next five years, then approximately 15 to 25% of new Agricultural Economists could potentially be hired into this market.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that these questions are based on an academic year without regard to the system (semester, trimester, or quarter) employed by the school.

The results for all respondents, including those indicating they would not hire an Agricultural Economist, show that 55% intend to hire within five years while an additional 30% are unsure. The overall percentage that state they will, or may, hire is the same for both groups of respondents, 85%. However, a smaller percentage of those who would hire an Agricultural Economist state that they are certain of hiring than the overall sample shows.

Of course, the probability of actually hiring may depend upon the motivation (e.g., departmental growth, retirements, etc.). Figure 2 shows the reason(s) for potential hiring given by the respondents<sup>3</sup>.

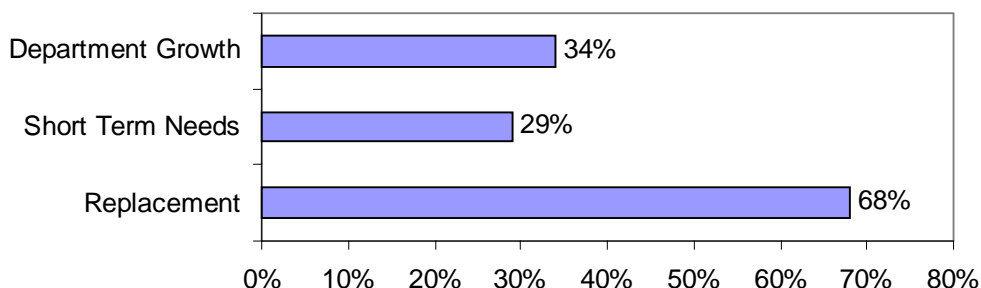


Figure 2. Reasons for Hiring in Economics Departments

The fact that Economics departments are hiring due to faculty turnover (replacements) and to fill short-term needs is not surprising. However, the result that 34% of all Economics departments are hiring, or may hire, due to department growth is surprising. It is in stark contrast to the outlook for Agricultural Economics departments voiced by Paarlberg and Dobson, and the general reduction in faculty at many Land Grant universities. It holds promise that future demand for faculty members at these schools may be higher.

### **Less Specialization**

We have examined the skills necessary to compete for employment in this market. However, given that teaching a wide variety of courses may be necessary once employed, we asked respondents to indicate their preferences as to the specialization level of potential hires. On a zero to five scale, five being highly specialized and zero being highly diversified, the average response was 2.7. This suggests that focusing exclusively on one specialty area in Ph.D. studies may not be beneficial if one plans to pursue employment in this market. Instead, it appears that the ideal candidate for a position at one of these smaller liberal arts schools would have an intrinsic knowledge in two or more areas of Economics. For example, a faculty member at such a school might teach Micro- and Macroeconomic theory, Econometrics, and International Trade in the same semester. Such a teaching load is quite different from that experienced by most Agricultural Economists in Land Grant universities.

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<sup>3</sup> More than one response was permitted on this question.

## **Conclusions**

We have suggested that Agricultural Economics graduate students have a nontraditional option to pursue upon completion of their degree programs. Many smaller Economics programs would consider hiring an Agricultural Economist who has had experience in working with undergraduate students in any capacity, particularly one who has taught at least one class. However, the fact that there is an alternative to traditional employment does not mean that graduate students can ease up. In fact, the opposite is true. To take full advantage of this additional opportunity, the student must meet the requirements set forth by his or her degree-granting university and work with undergraduate students in some fashion, preferably in a classroom setting. The more successful teaching-related responsibilities the student has, the more attractive he or she will be to Economics departments at smaller, liberal arts colleges and universities.

However, the responsibility for preparing students for this market does not fall only upon the student. Agricultural Economics departments must make teaching opportunities available to interested and qualified graduate students. The market for Agricultural Economics Ph.D.s seems to be increasingly fragmented and Agricultural Economics departments need to tailor their programs to meet the demand of several segments. In agricultural terms, our programs must provide specialty crops rather than commodities.

## **Recommendation**

This study shows that Agricultural Economics graduate students have an opportunity to gain employment at smaller, liberal arts colleges and universities. We have outlined a group of skills and experiences that will make them stand out in that market. Interested students must make a significant effort, in addition to department requirements, to achieve success in obtaining employment in an Economics department. The department should accommodate students' efforts in achieving this goal.

We propose the implementation of a mentoring program that matches graduate students with established, respected undergraduate professors within their Agricultural Economics department. Such a program would allow students to observe successful teaching styles. It should also permit them to prepare and present course lectures; prepare and grade homework assignments, quizzes and exams; hold office hours to answer undergraduate student questions; and similar responsibilities. Such a program would guide students toward achieving skills and experiences necessary to gain employment in a non-Land Grant Economics department.

## **References**

Christensen, J.A., D.A. Dillman, P.D. Warner, and P. Sillant, "The Public View Of Land Grant Universities: Results From a National Survey," *Choices*, Third Quarter 1995, pp. 37-39.

Dobson, W.D., "Strategies for Declining Academic Enterprises," *Choices*, Third Quarter 1995, pp. 29-33.

Paarlberg, D., "The Land Grant College System in Transition," *Choices*, Third Quarter 1992, p. 45.



## Responses to Survey: "Can Agricultural Economists Teach Economics?"

	<u>All Respondents</u>	<u>"Yes" to hiring Ag. Econ.</u>	<u>"No" to hiring Ag. Econ.</u>
Would you hire an Ag. Economist?	45%	100%	0%
What degree of specialization is most important?	2.71	2.73	2.66
How important is leading a discussion section?	3.77	3.93	3.76
How important is assisting a professor with a class?	3.61	3.8	3.64
How important is having full responsibility for a class?	4.11	4.28	3.99
How important is completing a research thesis?	4.39	4.51	4.34
How important is publishing a refereed journal article?	2.32	2.2	2.34
How important are other scholarly publications?	2.15	2.18	2.12
How important is presenting a paper?	3.02	2.99	3.06
How many faculty are employed in you department?			
Full Time	7.45	6.49	7.71
Part Time	2.29	1.89	2.68
Temporary	0.42	0.37	0.38
How many of these teach at least one course per year?			
Full Time	7.44	6.49	7.69
Part Time	2.23	1.74	2.68
Temporary	0.4	0.35	0.36
How many total classes per year does each professor teach?	6.61	6.91	6.44
How many different classes per year?	4.24	4.46	4.15
Faculty is expected to engage in research?	87%	85%	88%
Expect to fill position within 5 years or unsure?	85%	85%	86%
Unsure about filling position?	30%	39%	24%
For what reason(s) might this position be open?			
Department growth	26%	34%	20%
Vacated by current professor	65%	68%	66%
Short-term hiring	21%	29%	16%
Other	6%	7%	2%

## *Questionnaire: Can Agricultural Economists Teach Economics?*

**Please answer questions 1 - 3 as if you were filling a faculty position in your department within the next five years.**

1. Would you hire an individual with a Ph.D in Agricultural Economics?    YES    NO
  
2. Some graduate programs are designed to give the student a highly concentrated research focus in one specialty area while others are designed to give the student a broader, more general research background. What degree of specialization do you feel is most important?  

Most General			Most Balanced		Most Concentrated
1	2	3	4	5	
  
3. On a 1 to 5 scale, 1 being *unnecessary* and 5 being *essential*, how necessary do you feel each of the following is for new Ph.D.s to have experienced during their graduate studies?

	Unnecessary			Essential	
A. Leading a discussion (recitation) section	1	2	3	4	5
B. Assisting a professor in teaching a course	1	2	3	4	5
C. Having sole responsibility for preparing for and leading lectures in a course	1	2	3	4	5
D. Having completed a research thesis	1	2	3	4	5
E. Having published at least one refereed journal article	1	2	3	4	5
F. Having published scholarly articles in other journals or trade publications	1	2	3	4	5
G. Having presented at least one paper at a professional meeting	1	2	3	4	5

### About your department...

1. How many faculty, by type of appointment, are employed in your department?  
Full Time \_\_\_\_\_  
Part Time \_\_\_\_\_  
Temporary \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many of these are responsible for teaching at least one section of one course per year?  
Full Time \_\_\_\_\_  
Part Time \_\_\_\_\_  
Temporary \_\_\_\_\_

### Teaching responsibilities of your faculty...

For the following questions, *total classes* refers to the number of different sections a professor may teach, regardless of the course. *Different classes* refers to the total number of different courses the professor must prepare for. For example, if a professor teaches 2 sections of International Trade and 2 sections of Labor Economics, he or she has 4 total classes and 2 different classes.

1. How many *total classes* does your typical faculty member teach **per year**? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many *different classes* does your typical faculty member teach **per year**? \_\_\_\_\_

### Research responsibilities of your faculty...

1. Are your faculty members expected to engage in research? YES NO
2. If yes, please explain briefly, at the top of next page, what these expectations are (e.g., Do you expect a certain number of publications each year? Do you expect the faculty to generate grants or contracts for the department based on research?...)

**2. (cont.):**

**About your department's future...**

1. Do you expect to fill a position(s) in your department within the next five years?  
YES                                      NO                                      NOT SURE
  
2. If YES or NOT SURE, what will likely be the reason for the open position? (Please check all that apply):  
  
\_\_\_ New position due to growing department  
\_\_\_ Replacing a position vacated by another professor  
\_\_\_ Hiring on short-term contract  
\_\_\_ Other (please explain briefly)

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Please send survey results to:

Dept. Chair/Head\_\_\_\_\_

Dept. \_\_\_\_\_

Institution \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_