AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS: A FORK IN THE ROAD OR A CROOKED TRAIL?

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INTRODUCTION

In the past year, our most recent contribution to agricultural economics communication, *CHOICES*, has generated an extensive but timely dialogue concerning the land-grant system and agricultural economics as a profession. Beginning with Professor Schuh's article in *CHOICES* and letters in succeeding issues, the debate for peer review versus applied research is quite succinctly presented. Peer review in this connotation refers to purely disciplinary research and the test of whether results are "new." Most "applied" research is reviewed by peers.

The current version of the debate may have come in a critical period for agricultural economics, a time that may determine how or whether we continue to exist as a viable profession. I am not predicting the hammer of doom to fall next fiscal year if we do not make the "right choice," but the winds of change are out there somewhere.

The reasons are numerous and complex (assuming you can accept the hypothesis of a critical time). Two major hurdles that are of an immediate nature are the farm crisis and the funding for research and education (including extension). How we deal with these (or survive) may determine whether we take a fork in the road to an inconsequential destiny or follow the crooked trail of adapting to and being part of change. In my view, the fork in the road is not the clear choice. One fork is the peer review system followed entirely for funding and professional recognition of the individual scientist. The other is the path of formula funding and "applied" research. If we look more closely, in the middle of the fork is a faintly defined trail, more rugged and crooked, that has some elements of both forks. Following the path is more difficult, and at times, it comes close to one of the forks, providing the temptation to jump over. To avoid the temptation, we as individuals and as a profession must continually examine ourselves in what we do and expect.

In the first Presidential address to the SAEA annual meeting, Havlicek provided a historical view of the association and presented some thoughts for the future. He challenged us to strive to maintain and improve communications among ourselves as agricultural economists. Further, he warned us of the need to communicate to those outside our disciplinary confines.

In something of a follow-up, Conner assumed the two-fold task: (1) defining who and what we are and (2) viewing the forces that shape our profession and what we do. He raised the question of self-evaluation and asked, "What are we making ourselves into?" In a sense, the current dialogue reaches for an answer to that question, when, likely, there is no one answer that will suffice for the profession, given the diversity of the individual members.

Ikerd chose to emphasize Conner's second point, the forces that shape our profession, focusing on the current problems in agriculture. He went so far as to say that the existence of our profession may depend upon whether farm policy emphasizes world markets or the domestic economy, no doubt because of his view that ours is a mission-oriented profession.

Whether we view ourselves as primarily mission oriented or as purely disciplinary is at the heart of the dialogue in *CHOICES*. As one of the letters indicated, there is room for some of both, but how we are viewed by others will depend on which is emphasized. It is my contention that the gate to survival as a profes-

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sion is how others perceive us in the whole and not as fellow staff members at our place of employment. We can determine which gate to open by the key we use—the one to a smooth-looking fork in the road or the one to a difficult to walk, crooked path—in how we decide to let ourselves be perceived.

HOW ARE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS PERCEIVED?

There is little to indicate that there are easy solutions; we have difficulty in agreeing on what is the problem. Professor Schuh's article on revitalization of the land-grant system and the ensuing dialogue point to the extremes of how agricultural economists view themselves. Bromley characterized Schuh's view of the basic tenets of the land-grant system as serendipity, while his own views were called elitist. It could be argued that the two views differ in only one respect, whom the taxpaying public trusts to disperse the money. And that point brings the crux of the issue, what is accountability and are we accountable?

This thing called accountability will always be a moving target in a profession such as ours. To paraphrase Tangermann, no other sector of the economy has been the object of so much policy and economic analysis as agriculture. Crowds of policy makers and administrators pounce upon agriculture and take no rest until every imaginable activity is regulated. In spite of our analytical tools and efforts, governments are not happy with the results, and economists do not feel they understand most issues. Tangermann did not mention farmers' opinions, but consider the following statements.

"Farmers resent being made the goat of a series of unworkable farm programs . . . ." "Today's burdensome surpluses with their fantastic storage costs are symptoms of a sick farm program . . .," or ". . . continuing the present program will mean a further build-up in the budget expenditure . . . ." While many would agree with these sentiments, they were printed in the *Weekly Star Farmer* during the summer of 1959 (Hays). They could just as easily appear in the *Progressive Farmer* today (and probably have).

The problems in the farm sector addressed by agricultural economists are many and may have diverse twists from one point in time or location to another. Yet, farming brings out a unique sort of emotionalism that allows the farm problem to be stated in a single breath, as if there is or ought to be a single solution. If we have found the solution, there appears to be little satisfaction with it.

How we view ourselves and, consequently, how we are perceived are the forces that shape our future. One cannot be separated from the other; thus, we are to a great extent in control of our own destiny. It is not too soon for agricultural economists to ask the hard questions about the profession and its purpose.

Our Self-Perception

Schuh's original article contended that a strong disciplinary focus was eroding allegiance to the land-grant concept. He argued that the "pervasive" attitude that applied work is not important and that publishing for professional peers or consulting for the highest paying firm or agency were priority tasks contributed to the malaise. A remedy for the problem was to refocus on the "mission" and to allow administrators more discretion in allocation of funds.

Bromley argued that this was simplistic and would turn universities into publicly supported consulting firms—serving the interests of those who talked to the Dean last. He contended that there are enough organizations available to work on problem solving; the educational system's purpose is to provide new knowledge not being provided elsewhere.

A cynical view of our past efforts would hold that either as disciplinarians or on our missions, agricultural economists have not completely solved the economic problems of agriculture. Whether it is realistic to expect to find a solution to the farm problem is not the issue here, but rest assured we will be asked why we have not. The important point is whether our response will be deemed as merely an excuse for lack of relevance or as a legitimate argument.

Critical to self-perception is how we elect to judge ourselves. One advantage that agricultural economists have had over other disciplines has been our exposure to several parts of the agriculture spectrum. Are we maintaining that advantage, or are we becoming specialists in narrowly defined areas? The peer review process that emphasizes disciplinary work for journals and for grant money encourages a focus on problems having objectives with a limited scope which can be addressed in a relatively short time.

Reviews for papers and/or articles are for

the most part done by others doing similar work. While this may be suitable for assuring correct methods and terminology, it is not as effective for infusion of new ideas or for asking questions from a different perspective. In the paper evaluation process for the SAEA meeting, occasionally manuscripts are returned without a review because the subject matter was outside the potential reviewers' area of research. There are legitimate reasons for not reviewing a paper, but we must be careful not to merely find an excuse to avoid reading something not in current vogue.

A leading indicator of how we perceive ourselves can be found in published work. Over the past fifteen years or so, several articles ranking departments have been published by agricultural economists. A complete survey would be exhaustive; however, a partial listing (Holland and Redman; Opaluch and Just; Tauer and Tauer) provided rankings of agricultural economics departments based on various measures of journal output by faculty or graduates. The journals selected for sampling were chosen for "quality" and often did not include the regionals such as the *SJAE*.

More recently we have seen a suggestion for ranking departments by the number of citations an author receives (Beilock et al.), the reasoning being that citations indicate quality of work and not sheer volume. It is interesting to note that the lead article in the same issue of the *AJAE* listed eleven references of which two were by the senior author; the second article had three references to work by the coauthors. The data source for counting citations was the *Social Sciences Citations Index*, which did not include the regional agricultural economics journals in the database.

Emphasis on the peer review process offers simple alternatives, either enough is published or it is not. Numbers can be used to counter accountability questions. But judgment is not removed. Someone must decide what journals count, whether we count articles or citations. And this leans the scale of measurement heavily toward research at the expense of teaching.

Conner's question merits repeating: "What are we making ourselves into?" Broder bluntly reminded us that our association had done little to promote, improve, or recognize resident instruction. Yet a good number of us have at least some teaching responsibility. If we are to have a strong discipline, then teaching must take a higher priority.

Granted, this is not a simple task with promotion and tenure guidelines in existence today. A single department has little chance to change the philosophy of an entire university, but there has to be a starting point. As Smith so aptly put it, the promotion and tenure system has become institutionalized and is university wide. Whether this has arisen from the notion, as he argues, that accountability runs counter to scholarly activity or, my contention, that numbers of publications give a false sense of being accountable makes little difference if public support is not generated.

How Others Perceive Us

Recently commenting on the search for an Experiment Station Director at Mississippi State, a fellow scientist (another discipline) commented that he hoped we would select an agriculturist such as an agriculture economist or a food scientist. He wanted someone with a background in the broad scheme of things in agriculture and not a strong commodity interest that he perceived as having too narrow a view.

If that view is taken as complimentary, then our channels of communication need to be continually examined. When our recognized quality of output is only in those outlets that other economists read, we will lose that audience we have with other fields. On the other hand, if it means that economists serve only a staff role because they can work with numbers, then our output must be evaluated in a different way.

The consequences of our problem solving efforts today may be more widely dispersed than in times past. Mass media can become a massive microscope. Failures become more visible than successes. On one hand we are accused of trying to do what should be left to the private sector, and on the other of selling out to big business and emphasizing those that do not need help at the expense of the small.

Agriculture economists are probably guilty on both counts. This would not necessarily be an indictment; the ability to systematically approach problems naturally leads to involvement. However, care must be taken not to forget those segments of society that cannot reward the system with large endowments or political power. The purpose here is not to make an issue of whether agricultural economists have done enough for the "family farm," but to serve as a reminder of the perceptions of others.

The question of private versus public may

have just begun. Provision of services such as variety development, soil testing, and farm management assistance that were once easily accepted as the domain of Cooperative Extension and the Experiment Stations are widely available from private firms. The number of firms and individuals performing market studies or management consulting seems to be on the increase. Today the question of what should be left to the private sector has a degree of potential seriousness not found in the past. Hopefully, the land-grant scientist will not become viewed as the joke of another government bureaucrat here to help.

Elected officials will continue to face pressure to do something about government spending. Because such a large part of the public spending is almost locked in, the pressure will be on more discretionary programs. Competition for public funds places any program depending upon discretionary dollars, including higher education and agricultural economics research, at risk.

Presumably those public services deemed important would fare relatively well. Higher education, Experiment Stations, and the Extension Service do not appear to be faring well. Due to budget cuts in Mississippi, I could speak from personal experience of their consequences, and today I suspect I would hear a chorus of "me too" from the audience. Beginning on November 26, 1986, and for the next two weeks, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* carried stories of plans for university system budget cuts and/or reorganization from three different states.

The emphasis on publishing in journals, or obtaining private consulting and the like to achieve advancement and recognition in the academic arena, raises the potential for conflict of interest. In a legal and a moral sense, the question of what or how much is included in a contract to work for the taxpayer will not disappear. Literally interpreted, some conflict of interest laws could mean that a scientist working on a research project that provides results that are used in his (her) private consulting could be acting illegally.

SUMMARY

The preceding was not intended to be an indictment of the land-grant system, refereed journals, nor the profession of agricultural economics. It is obvious that I, along with others, believe that we need to reexamine our priorities and see where we are heading. The way we elect to judge ourselves will by and large determine how we will be judged by non-economists.

Peer review is not merely important, it is essential to a legitimate science, social or otherwise. It is the check and balance in a system that has potential for error, be it accidental or intentional. But peer review is not an end; it is a means to an end. If the laurel the case for agricultural funding rests on is that it was peer reviewed, I fear we have an extended wait for a raise.

Formula funding and allocation of funds to scientists by administrators is no better or worse than the formula or the administrator. At the same time, it is not clear how a panel of marketing economists would automatically make a better decision about funding market research than an appointed administrator who must decide how much should go to marketing and how much should go to production economists, unless you happened to be one of the marketing economists.

At the risk of staying on a fence, there is nothing wrong with maintaining a blend of peer review and traditional administrative allocation of funds. The problem is finding the appropriate balance of each. The land-grant system in spite of its problems has been successful. It has had no small part in developing a highly productive agriculture and in providing a source of education for many. As a part of that system, agricultural economists have a responsibility to push for change where needed, but it is just as important to hold to workable ideals.

We need to recognize the diversity of ideas and demands upon members of the profession, and the part these play in how we review each other. Pope and Hallam found, not surprisingly, that differences in values and judgments about facts were abundant among AAEA members. We cannot afford the luxury of a single measure of agricultural economics, at the risk of taking ourselves too seriously.

I believe the profession is strong. The communication with others has taken a step forward with *CHOICES*. The diversity of needs that leads to conflicting views also brings a cross-fertilization of ideas. Pope and Hallam quite appropriately asked that in the search for positive economic truths, the profession must recognize the role that background and self-interest play in perception. We cannot follow the narrow road of peer review or of formula funding and wait for accolades to come in.

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