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DESIGNING GRADUATE EDUCATION FOR AGRIBUSINESS STUDENTS

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Abstract

For several years, universities in the U.S. have been struggling with defining and refining undergraduate and graduate agribusiness education programs. With the release of the recommendations of the National Agribusiness Education Commission, the search for the key ingredients of a Masters-level program has intensified.

Mississippi State University has been among those universities attempting to define the parameters of a "cutting edge" agribusiness program. Faculty interest within the College of Business and Industry and the Agricultural Economics Department to develop a joint program has precipitated intensive efforts to achieve this goal. A nationally recognized agribusiness group of six academic leaders served as a Co-operative State Research Service team to assess the University's potential, using the concept of an agribusiness institute as an integrating and management vehicle. Efforts in this direction have been aided by a USDA planning grant now moving into its second year. A survey of Mid-South agribusiness leaders indicates the interest of the industry in the development of the program. The final step is to address the logistical details required to convert the current Master of Agribusiness Management in the Department of Agricultural Economics to a jointly administered program of study.

With the numbers of people employed in production agriculture declining, universities, especially land-grant institutions, have for some time been increasingly examining the expansion of agribusiness education. Generally, this development of agribusiness programs has been at the undergraduate level. However, with the release of the recommendations of the National Agribusiness Education Commission (Downey), significant interest has shifted to Masters-level agribusiness programs.

This is not to say that graduate-level agribusiness education has been ignored in the past or that universities were not curious about the possibilities of such programs. As a matter of fact, several researchers studied the status of Masters-level agribusiness pro-

grams and the supply and demand for graduates of such programs (Coulter, Slaton, and Goecker; French and Erven; Litzenberg and Schneider; Schneider and Litzenberg; and Hambley).

The Department of Agricultural Economics at Mississippi State University (MSU) added an undergraduate agribusiness degree in 1985 but several years earlier had already modified a Master of Agriculture program to include an emphasis on business courses. The Department was in the process of seeking a name change for the program to Master of Agribusiness at the time of the release of the Commission report.

Perhaps this article should be subtitled the "Mississippi State University Experience" because that is its theme. Its purpose is to outline how one land-grant university has approached the problem of installing a Master of Agribusiness Management program following the Commission recommendations. Hopefully, the Mississippi experience will be helpful to others undertaking the task.

THE MERGING OF FACULTY INTEREST

Even though the National Agribusiness Education Commission suggested a core of courses for an Agribusiness Master's, no one has developed a model for establishing a master's program that is actually jointly administered by agriculture and business. Therefore, each university has been struggling to develop its own unique program, dependent upon demand, the interests and personalities of the faculty and administrators, and funds available.

Faculty members from the Department of Agricultural Economics at MSU contacted the Dean of the College of Business and Industry to seek a name change for the Master of Agriculture Program. Surprisingly, the Dean of the College of Business and Industry expressed interest in exploring the feasibility of a jointly administered degree, along the lines of the Commission recommendations. The Department of Agricultural Economics stated a similar interest in developing such a program. As a result, the Deans of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics and of the college of Business and Indus-

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try appointed a six-person Agribusiness Task Force to formalize the investigative process.

In the spring of 1990, the Department of Agricultural Economics was scheduled for a Cooperative State Research Service (CSRS USDA) review. Roland Robinson, CSRS, was agreeable to focusing the review on analyzing the potential of Mississippi State University to develop a joint Master's program administered through an Agribusiness Institute. This proposed institute was also visualized as having lesser but still significant and related roles in agribusiness research and continuing professional education. The CSRS review team consisted of Michael Cook, Professor, University of Missouri; Charles French, Consultant; Kerry Litzenberg and Vernon Schneider, Professors at Texas A&M University; and James Nielson and Roland Robinson of CSRS, USDA. Three members of this review team, along with Mississippi State University President, Donald Zacharias, were members of the National Agribusiness Education Commission which developed the recommendations for an agribusiness Master's program. Thus, the team was uniquely qualified to evaluate the proposed venture.

The CSRS team concluded that there was considerable potential for a successful agribusiness Master's program at MSU, based on the joint interest in and resources of agriculture and business. However, they cautioned against a broad, generically defined program and instead recommended that the focus be demand driven.

As a result of the CSRS review and the long hours of discussion which it entailed, a strong commitment was generated among interested business and agriculture faculty. A significant bonding and cooperative attitude developed between the two faculties. To sharpen the focus of the program, Kerry Litzenberg was invited back to the campus for another week of intensive deliberations. This effort solidified the commitment to develop a program and created a visionary framework of a program that would capitalize on the agribusiness strength areas of MSU and the Mid-South agribusiness sector.

SURVEY OF MID-SOUTH AGRIBUSINESS LEADERS

An agribusiness planning grant was requested and was funded through CSRS as a part of the 1990 Farm Bill. These funds became available in early 1991 and have been used to solicit input from agribusiness leaders in the Mid-South regarding the feasibility and potential direction of such a Master's program. Since an undergraduate agribusiness program has existed in the Department of Agricultural Economics for several years (and was considerably modified in

1990), industry input was also requested to evaluate this program. Interest in a wide variety of potential agribusiness continuing education programs was also assessed.

The technique for conducting the survey was to develop a list of target agribusiness leaders who were invited to a dinner at six central locations. A presentation was made concerning agribusiness activities at MSU and the proposed plan for the joint Masters program, after which the leaders were asked to complete a five-page questionnaire. In addition, some participants were given additional copies of the questionnaire, which were completed by other interested agribusiness executives in their firms. More than 100 questionnaires were completed.

The process of conducting the survey provided many by-products. Agribusiness people who previously had not had the opportunity for such a small-group exchange of ideas with either agriculture or business at MSU were pleased to have an opportunity to be informed and to be consulted about the future direction of the activities. The sessions provided a unique opportunity to inform a substantial number of key agribusiness executives about both undergraduate and graduate programs. These sessions also provided the opportunity to discuss the need for internships and to solicit input regarding the feasibility of and demand for a wide variety of continuing professional education programs that might be provided by the University. From a public-relations perspective, the sessions were very valuable.

Another truly significant aspect of the data-gathering process was a series of faculty tours of agribusiness firms. Two overnight tours were taken of the cotton, catfish, and poultry industries. A wide assortment of College of Business and Industry and College of Agriculture and Home Economics faculty participated. These trips greatly improved the relations and understanding among the participating faculty members and also gave them a much greater appreciation for the other disciplines represented. Possibly the most significant benefit, however, was observing the agribusiness production, processing, and marketing chain in actual operation. This "mini-view" of the targeted agribusiness industries provided the participating faculty members with a true appreciation of the complexity of agribusiness and of the skills and knowledge of both agricultural and business disciplines necessary for successful management.

With regard to the survey of agribusiness leaders during 1991, the faculty was told that individuals with the Master of Agribusiness Management degree will (1) be highly attractive to agribusiness employers, (2) receive higher salaries from agribusiness

employers than those with other types of Master's degrees, (3) enjoy enhanced career development opportunities, and (4) enhance global competitiveness of agribusiness firms.

In order to solicit the leaders' opinion on the degree of emphasis in subject matter areas, the proposed Master's program was presented to them. They responded that the (1) common body of business knowledge, (2) technical agriculture, and (3) business emphasis were about right. However, they felt that the emphasis on computer skills was too low. Perhaps this feeling arose from the failure to explain that not only are computer skills taught in specialized classes, but also that the application of computer skills represents a significant component of many agribusiness courses.

With regard to placing priority on specific skills, the findings were similar to those of Litzenberg and Schneider for the national survey of skills desired of employees. Respondents ranked oral communication slightly ahead of leadership, written communications and ethics which were all tied for second.

AGRIBUSINESS INSTITUTE

The Agribusiness Institute was formally established in 1991. The governing council is composed of the Deans of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, of the College of Business and Industry, and of the Graduate School. Currently, the Institute is administered by the initially appointed co-chairmen of the Agribusiness Task Force representing the College of Business and Industry and the Department of Agricultural Economics. Membership in the Institute consists of the faculty engaged in or having an interest in agribusiness activities.

Through the Institute, the faculty from agriculture and business have responded to several potential agribusiness activities. These faculty members have developed four proposals for joint international activities. The Institute provides an excellent vehicle for interdisciplinary interface with other campus organizations, such as International Programs.

CURRENT STATUS OF MASTER'S PROGRAM

Other recent developments at MSU include the name change of the Master of Agriculture degree to the Master of Agribusiness Management degree. The Department of Agricultural Economics faculty, by restructuring its undergraduate program, has been able to reallocate sufficient resources to begin developing its share of the new courses proposed for the Master's program.

The Master of Agribusiness Management Program, although still currently administered by Agri-

cultural Economics, has been modified to comply with the proposals of the Agribusiness Institute by initially using existing courses. However, the program, of course, changes each semester as new recommended courses are developed. The Department of Agricultural Economics added a risk management course during fall 1991; an economic and social environment of agribusiness course was introduced for spring 1992; and an international agricultural trade and policy course will be offered in fall 1992. In the spring semester of 1992, 16 students were enrolled in the program. This has occurred without advertising, which is being withheld until the College of Business and Industry joins the program.

Future tasks include (1) completing the tabulation and analysis of the agribusiness survey results, (2) identifying demand for and offering a limited number of continuing education programs, (3) determining the resources required for the College of Business and Industry to join Agricultural Economics in conducting and administering the Master's program, and (4) jointly developing procedures in the Agribusiness Institute for admission of students and for administration of the program.

Several points should be made with regard to the future decision of the College of Business and Industry to formally enter a joint agribusiness relationship. In the earlier stages of consideration, many of the College of Business and Industry faculty were not aware of the pros and cons of the program. Budgets have been tight, and, as a result, this has not been an opportune time to suggest that new courses be developed. For nearly two years there has been a steadily widening participation of College of Business and Industry faculty in joint activities. During this time, Agricultural Economics and College of Business and Industry faculty have been discussing team teaching, exchanging cases to bridge gaps in courses, and the possible modification of one section of selected courses in the College of Business and Industry for the program where multiple sections of such courses are offered. It is expected that a decision will be made during spring 1992 to formally announce a joint program, with initial implementation perhaps as soon as the fall of 1992. Another factor contributing to an early decision may be an enrollment decline in College of Business and Industry which occurred during the 1991 fall semester.

The planning grant made possible these joint activities at a time when otherwise there would have been insufficient resources to pursue such activities in a vigorous manner. The grant has been extended for another year. This extension will permit concentration on course development and further cultivation of industry relationships and commitments.

Other objectives include the selection of an agribusiness industry advisory board, solicitation of internships, development of a lecture series to be delivered by invited agribusiness executives and officials, and student recruitment.

SUMMARY

In summary, a comprehensive description of how MSU has progressed to its present level of agribusiness activity is a formidable task. Much of the credit

must go to the hard work of a few faculty members who have a strong belief that the joint venture is a sound idea. Also, not to be overlooked is the interest and contribution of administrators who share this belief. CSRS and the planning grant have been invaluable. Hopefully, some of the lessons which have been learned and the path by which progress has been achieved will provide guidance to other universities who are struggling with the complexities of a similar transition.

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