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**DISCUSSION: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR  
COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-BUSINESS**

**J. Michael Sprott**

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The authors of this paper are to be congratulated for the comprehensiveness and clarity which they were able to obtain throughout the paper. Their major contribution is the listing of the strengths and weaknesses of selected educational and/or consulting delivery systems, as in Table 1. They farsightedly point out that the major decision at this juncture is whether to deliver assistance to the large agriculture clientele, rather than which vehicle is selected for delivery.

This discussant was intrigued with the justification put forth for our working with the large commercial farmer. Indeed, to work with this group seems to offer a panacea, one which none of us would demean. They document the spin-offs which would occur providing we decide to deliver educational programs to the large commercial farmers as:

1. Force interdisciplinary efforts on land-grant campuses.
2. Force production and marketing specialists or researchers to work together.
3. Force research and Extension to work more closely together.
4. Force research and teaching arms of the land-grant institutions to work more closely together.
5. Supply new funds for departmental operations.
6. Develop opportunities for graduate student programs and thesis problems.
7. Provide relevance to the on-going teaching programs within a department.
8. Supply firm income and expense data for budgeting by Extension specialists and others.

After listing the advantages of educational programs to large commercial farmers, the authors

imply that we cannot ignore this audience. This discussant would contend that we can and have ignored this audience in many cases for the following reasons, only a few of which are noted in this paper: (1) institutions are subject to structural rigidity; (2) institutions having some tie with government seem even more prone to this rigidity; (3) coupling this with human resistance to change, it is not difficult to ascertain why we have been unwilling to restructure our Extension and Research organization to better serve this new and emerging audience. Several of the solutions put forth by the authors, e.g., the task force or institute, involve large increments of loss in administrative control over the direction of the members of that institute or task force. Individuals within these task forces lose sight of the "boss" or an identifiable leader; there may be three or four "bosses" claiming authority over a particular institute member. This problem quickly violates the unity-of-command principle as noted in Ken Duft's article [1]. Allowing unlimited efforts by members of task forces or institutes would require changes in the existing policy regarding Extension workers crossing county or state lines at length; it might well tend to ignore current Extension field staff or to circumvent them, and the institute member may find his identity lost in a research project or report, as noted by the authors.

Allowing a digression, this discussant would like to point out that while on occasion research does terminate a project and individuals can move to new and better things after removing from their repertoire of responsibilities certain other projects, the typical Extension Service worker is faced with the situation where he seldom if ever discontinues doing any thing. Most of the Extension programs are taken on in addition to rather than in place of a current program.

This implies that the typical Extension specialist housed in an on-campus department already has at least three groups or individuals expecting to have immediate call on his time; they are the County Extension Agents, the Department Heads, and the Administrators. Adding a new dimension through a task force or institute arrangement would remove not one of the above members, but would add an additional one, certainly violating the principle on command mentioned above.

The authors do a thorough job of identifying the problems which several of the new educational delivery systems offer for administration. The autonomy of the institute or the task force is viewed with suspicion by many administrators. Personal experience of this discussant would indicate the description, by the authors, as "monolithic" may well describe the institute or task force vehicle. The problems faced by the individual when attempting to undertake participation in some of these two delivery systems are no less pronounced, but are of a much lower order so far as impact on the educational institution. The individual working within a task force, institute or in a consulting role may be more visible; a higher price is being paid for production on the part of that individual. The authors strongly point out that an individual working within one of these three vehicles must make recommendations, as opposed to a somewhat benign offering of alternatives on a pot luck basis where the decision maker can pick or choose. The authors note that individuals tend to balk at sharing the credit for good work which was done through the task force or institute.

In turn, the decision to perfect new delivery systems for large commercial farmers will cause problems for our other publics, the problem of justification of undue efforts within the commercial agricultural ranks as opposed to newly emerging people problems. Dr. Ken Farrell [2], Deputy Administrator of the ERS, recently foretold of a drop to 150,000 commercial farm production units sometime during the periods between 1980 and 2000. How many task force, institute or private consulting jobs can we do with that few commercial farmers? On the other side, Dr. Ed Kirby [3], Administrator of the Extension Service, USDA, recently foretold of the expanding areas of work for which Extension would be responsible. They were: (1) low income, small farmers, (2) environmental, (3) food processing and storage, (4) pest management, (5) commodity programs, e.g., sheep. Administrator Kirby obviously sees a large and expanding new set of publics for the land-grant institutions and all its members. There will

have to be a time allocation under the direction of the administration of these institutions if the individuals are to maintain relevance, and satisfying performance.

Just as there are new groups of new audiences, so are there new groupings of old audiences. The commercial producer-marketing firm is seen by Dr. Eric Thor [5], FCS, as shifting from one of open market (80 percent of productive activity) to market coordination (80 percent of productive activity) during the 1970's. Dr. Thor fully expects coordination, cooperation, or informal contracts to dominate the production and marketing of agricultural goods during the decade of the 70's, an optimistic opinion. The point is, there are areas where the land-grant institution can be of indirect help to both the old and the new audiences. Holt, et al., point out vividly the several advantages from working with the large commercial farms, but the advantages were basically couched in direct help. As itemized in a recent paper by Dr. Ted Nelson [4], there are several additional areas of assistance which the land-grant institutions can offer with equal success. Indirect help which has and will continue to be available to all audiences as listed by Nelson are: (1) legal help in such areas as estate planning, lease forms, etc., (2) indirect help for producers through our work with Internal Revenue Service and income tax meetings for practitioners and producers, (3) indirect help through the computerization of decision making, be it for the small part-timer or the large commercial farmer, and (4) the efforts of our several institutions to work with financial institutions throughout the state. The indirect help creates a better awareness of the value of farm records, cash flow analyses, and farm financial management in general.

This paper makes a special issue of the decision to train financial managers while this discussant would contend that we all have been doing this for several years at most of the institutions. The next method of disseminating information to large commercial farms were intensive classes, shortcourses, and conferences; again, this discussant would suggest that these programs have been planned and implemented for years in the land-grant institutions. The next method listed by the authors was the commodity teams, a recent development at Texas A&M University and one which is suspicious to be in existence at other institutions. The three areas where difficulties lie and where the paper was insufficient in its recommendations are the areas of consulting, institutes, and task forces. As mentioned earlier the task forces and institutes have the same problems revolving on administrative control and

supplemented by problems of funding and proper credit for the individual efforts within these methods. Individual consulting continues to be a knotty problem even after the Holt paper.

Major criticisms of the paper center on the lack of attention paid to indirect help currently being extended to both the small and large commercial farmers, and the fact that the authors fell into the same trap that they extol those other of us in the discipline to avoid; that is, they offered only alternatives. The strongest recommendation in the paper was the one in the summary where it was reported, "... some tough decisions need to be made ...". Granted, there were three institutions

represented by the authors of this paper, but it was hoped, somewhat selfishly, that they would have put on a hard line as to the impediments placed on the social scientist, or any scientist, who is disallowed or dissuaded from doing individual consulting, or who feels insecure or unfulfilled in working in institutes or task force. This paper was presented on safe, or neutral grounds so far as administrative repercussions are concerned; therefore, the disappointment that the results of the study were not summarized in stronger recommendations. Objectivity is a cloak under which we seek refuge from making recommendations even to our peers, let alone our administrators.

#### REFERENCES

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