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Department of  
Agricultural Economics  
Report No. 146

May 1986

24500

# THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY RESOURCE ECONOMISTS

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Proceedings of a Conference Sponsored by NCR-111  
a North Central Regional Research Strategy  
Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Policy  
Held in Lincoln, Nebraska, November 5-6, 1984

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The Role of University Resource Economists:  
An Introduction to the Issues

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A major responsibility of the North Central Regional Research Strategy Committee (NCR-111) is to investigate research, extension and teaching needs in the general area of Natural Resource and Environmental Policy. Since its inception in 1978, NCR-111 has pursued numerous specific Natural Resource topics, but with each topic it became increasingly evident that differences of opinion regarding specific needs could usually be traced to differences in opinion regarding the appropriate role and mission of university Resource Economists. This led to the decision to sponsor a conference which focused specifically on the role of Resource Economists in Land Grant Universities.

To set the stage for the conference it is necessary to review the major developments which explain, at least in part, the concern over the proper role of university Resource Economists. Two underlying issues appear to dominate the debate. The first involves pragmatic versus academic pursuits, while the second involves general fund versus contract funding of university activity.

Land Grant Universities in general and the Agricultural Economics Profession in particular have evolved from pragmatic, problem solving institutions to become entities which closely resemble the institutions they were designed to complement

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(Johnson, 1984). Whereas Land Grant Universities were once proud to proclaim their client centered orientation to practical problem solving, they have increasingly sought to emulate the more academic orientation of conventional universities. Likewise, whereas Agricultural Economics was once proud of a multidisciplinary, problem solving role, more recently Agricultural Economists have scrambled to be viewed as Academic Economists first and Agricultural Economists second. The magnitude and the implications of this evolution are especially severe in the case of Natural Resource Economics.

As a sub unit of Agricultural Economics, Resource Economics has its roots in what was once called Land Economics. Historically, it was the Land Economists who took special pride in investigating practical social problems. Contemporary Resource Economists (Many of whom once claimed the title Land Economists), however, have focused their attention on increasingly esoteric and academic issues. Whereas the typical Resource Economist (Land Economist) of 1950 took pride in writing for and interacting with clientele groups, the Resource Economist of 1984 writes for his colleagues via the professional journals.

The implications of the trend from the pragmatic toward the academic has many dimensions, with goodness or badness depending on ones perspective. One alleged implication of this trend has been increased difficulty in securing tax support for land grant universities. Academic pursuits, which at best do not pay off in terms of improved social welfare for many years and, at worst, prove to be useless exercises, are much more difficult to

sell to the public than activities which have more immediate payoffs. Another alleged implication concerns problem solving needs. Some conference participants contended that private industry and consulting firms do an adequate job of meeting many of the immediate problems of clientele groups and, thus, there is less need for the problem solving services of land grant universities than there once was. Still another view holds that there is a current need for the kind of objective public interest problem solving which can only be met by land grant universities.

The trend toward increased emphasis on contract funding of universities also has important implications for the role of university resource economists. However, the implications are more difficult to assess, because funding trends appear to contradict the trend towards more academic emphasis. While the contributions of university resource economists have clearly become more academic, the financial support for Resource Economists has evolved away from general tax support in the direction of increased dependence on problem specific contracts. This situation has created the specter of Resource Economists searching for research topics which can be published in periodicals read by their colleagues, yet relevant enough to be of interest to funding entities. The net result is that nobody wins. Funding entities are often disappointed and thus reluctant to fund further programs, because Resource Economists spend too much time trying to boot leg academic work with problem solving contracts. Likewise, Resource Economists are frustrated, because university reward systems call for writing for ones colleagues,

while contract commitments call for a problem solving orientation. The net result has been considerable confusion and disagreement over the proper role of university Resource Economists.

There are several possible explanations for the seemingly simultaneous and contradictory development of more academic activity, with relatively less general and more contract funding of universities. One hypothesis expressed by conference participants was that contract funding had increased because the general public has been unwilling to financially support purely academic work, thus forcing academicians to accept contract funding as a last resort. Another hypothesis holds that general fund support has diminished in relative terms because pursuit of client specific contract funding has damaged the credibility of the university (Supalla and Bella, 1984). Still another hypothesis holds that contemporary Resource Economists increasingly elect to pursue academic rather than problem solving activities, because their training, performance incentives and the administrative structure of universities makes it difficult to pursue relevant problems solving activities.

Inherent in the aforementioned trends and in the hypotheses which might explain the trends are a series of important questions which the conference was designed to address, including:

1. What should be the balance between client specific problem solving activity and colleague oriented academic activity within land grant universities?
2. Should contract funding of university activity be encouraged or discouraged?
3. Are university reward systems consistent with the appropriate mission of land grant universities?

4. What has been the historic focus of land grant universities, with emphasis on Resource Economics, and how has the focus changed over time?
5. What are the respective comparative advantages of Resource Economists in universities, in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and in private consulting firms, with respect to the total natural resource and environmental policy research and teaching agenda?

The conference did not provide answers to these questions, nor was there any evidence of a consensus. What did emerge, however, was a better basis for a continued dialog and a much improved mutual understanding of alternative views. The papers which compose this proceedings span the full range of perspectives and represent an insightful look at where we have been, where we ought to go and why we ought to go there.