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THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY RESOURCE ECONOMISTS

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The Role of the University in Public Policy Research and Education

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Our title should properly be posed as a question: Does the university and its scholars have a role in public policy research and education? Scholars have been posing this question ever since public policy became a concern in the academic community. A public policy research and education approach has been developed by college of agriculture workers. This approach involves defining policy issues, developing alternatives to deal with these issues, predicting the consequences associated with each alternative, and then letting the citizen or political actor make the decision. This approach appears clear, tidy, and logical. But it has also, at times, been a source of frustration. For example: What issues? What alternatives? What consequences? What assumptions in answering these questions?

What are the useful roles that can be assumed by the scholar in policy formation? Charles W. Anderson, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, recently put forth an alternative approach. He holds that a scholar's best chance for success in influencing public policy may be to be a kind of devil's advocate, "a partisan of the neglected perspective".[1] He indicates that scholars should clarify and

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[1]From the Chronicle of Higher Education. Vol. XXIX, No. 3, September 12, 1984, pp. 5 & 10.

make explicit the assumptions which underlie a given policy. This is a matter of regarding the policy making process itself, rather than the policy makers, as client. The objective here is that of keeping the argument open, not resolving it. He suggests four roles as possible for scholars investigating public policy:

- a) Entrepreneurial advocacy of a new policy or program, or an improved one.
- b) Trusteeship concerning existing policy and its beneficiaries.
- c) Rational criticism or defense of public policy based on principle.
- d) Programmatic analysis or problem solving.

Somewhat similar are comments of Rein and White,[2] as follows: "The long-standing problem solving model is in large part a myth. Research may solve problems, but is also has three other functions: (1) identifying problems as a step toward fulfilling issues on the agenda; (2) mobilizing government actions; and (3) confronting and settling dilemmas and tradeoffs." They also suggest that the search for an issue is the life blood of politics; that policy dilemmas involve a conflict of values; and that politics is quite different from science.

The involvement of University staff in public policy formulation is of comparatively recent origin, when viewed against the backdrop of university history. Early American colleges were modeled in the European tradition and were in most cases church related. The emphases were on philosophy, theology,

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[2]Martin Rein and Sheldon H. White. "Can Policy research help policy?" The Public Interest. Fall (1977) p. 130.

and the classics. The ivory tower image of the classic university, characterized in more recent times as "town and gown", implied a separation, an isolation of the university from the affairs of men. Scholars were left free to contemplate truth, the heavens, or the laws of nature. They were not expected to contribute to the solution of contemporary problems.

The implications of the Morrill Act establishing Land Grant Colleges and the subsequent Hatch and Smith-Lever legislation laid the groundwork for a new set of relationships between scholarship and public policy. The increased accessibility to higher education, and funding of research and informal education on problems of practical origin in agriculture set the stage for scholarship useful for policy.

The emphasis in early years by Colleges of Agriculture and USDA was on biological and physical sciences. McDean recounts an exchange of correspondence between Henry C. Taylor, then a graduate student under Ely at the University of Wisconsin, and Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson.[3] Taylor, not devoid of egotism, advised Wilson to hire him upon his graduation so he could reorganize the USDA around the new economic knowledge he was acquiring at the University of Wisconsin. Wilson applauded young Taylor's aspiration but suggested he must learn how to do something that somebody wants done and learn to to it well. He told Taylor to consider economics as side issues and study plant diseases. Taylor, much later, did establish a social science analysis capacity in the USDA.

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[3]Harry C. McDean. Professionalism in the Rural Social Sciences 1896-1919. Agricultural History, pp. 373-92.

A parenthetical note: Even though cast in a more general vein in parts, this paper is actually directed at the natural resource policy area. Of course, resource economists can learn from the experience of policy specialists of related fields.

The early agricultural economists were successful in establishing economic scholarship in an academic environment stressing the practical application of science to increase the quantity and quality of farm products. One useful thrust was farm management studies and cost account routes that enable individual farmers to increase their productivity and profit. Agronomists could understand such benefits. Warren, Boss and Spillman were the leaders in this effort. Taylor and Ely, among others, disagreed with this emphasis and wanted more attention to macro and policy issues. McDean tells of the conflict and cooperation between the groups. For example, Taylor invited Spillman to Wisconsin to organize a farm management program and Warren to speak on farm management topics. Spillman hired two of Taylor's top graduate students in USDA and Warren invited Taylor to lecture at Cornell. By 1918, there has developed a consensus that both types of efforts were needed and the American Farm Economics Association was established in 1919.

The Development of Public Policy in the University

The emergence of public policy as a legitimate field for research and extension was coincident with the government programs of the 1930's. The massive intrusion of government into the affairs of mean gave rise to almost limitless issues of choice and options for decision. It also provided a huge living

laboratory for the observation of effectiveness of policy decisions and the subsequent institutional arrangements for carrying them out.

As public policy in agriculture emerged as an academic area it began to differentiate, with scholars tending to focus on price and income policy, marketing policy, international economics, and land policy. This was particularly true with respect to teaching and research. In early years this was less true in extension; however, the differentiation is not developing there also.

Public policy development in the university was characterized in the early years by the emergence of a few stars. We can cite such scholars as Ely, Wehrwein, Taylor, Spillman, and Stein. Starting in the 30's they were joined by Black, Jesness, Paarlberg, Cochrane, and Salter. The latter group tended to apply economic logic more directly than did those who came at the beginning.

In agriculture the Farm Foundation can be credited with the beginnings of organized effort on behalf of land policy with the sponsorship of the North Central Land Tenure committee, later known as NCR-6. Actually the topics considered by this committee included not only tenure, but land prices, credit, land use, and law. This committee was in fact the precursor of NCR 111. In the Plains the Subcommittee on Tenure, Credit, and Land Values of the Northern Great Plains Agricultural Council came into being at about the same time; its interests included land use, conservation, water, tenure, credit and other components of policy. It was another pioneer in the field of resource policy.

Other early regional committees concerned with land tenure and related problems were organized in the Southwest and the Southeast. In the West committees on water and range problems dealt with similar issues.

The early postwar years--the late 40's and early 50's--were the "growing up" period for resource policy in terms of the number of persons entering the field, the numbers of students in land economics classes, the volume of research, and the amount and variety of extension and service activity. This was a period of increasing specialization, and we began to hear of tenure specialists, land use specialists, farm finance specialists, and the development of agricultural law.

By the late 50's the field of land tenure became known as land economics. Rather than a focus and specific set of problems relating to the control and use of land for farming, a broader set of issues involved in the use of land for a number of purposes was examined. With the development and application of production economics logic in agricultural economics in the 60's and 70's, the designation shifted from land economics to resource economics. The set of problems was enlarged to include issues of associated resources - water, air and the environment - as well as land issues. The shifts in designation and enlargement of problem sets increased the scope of public policy issues considerably. While the early work in land tenure had a significant policy component, resource economics analysis is in large measure a policy subject-matter.

The period 1940-60 was one of "testing of the boundaries" concerning the roles of university policy specialists, and of conflicts between the scholar and private interest. The positions taken by scholars contradicted the values of lay people, or were contradictory to the political positions of one group or another. The oleo margarine case at Iowa State is a legendary example. Other examples can be cited in the area of taxation, of farm leasing arrangements, or of water development projects, to cite only a few. Some such cases ended up as issues of academic freedom when lay vested interests complained about the position of a professor to the president or a member of the board. In those early years the administrator or board member might attempt to cause the professor to moderate his position, by suggestion or by more vigorous means. As some of these cases became the subjects of academic freedom proceedings, the meanings of academic freedom on the one hand and academic responsibility on the other were explored and defined. Also the institutional arrangements for handling such cases became formalized and clarified.

This period saw an emerging dilemma between theory and practice. With the elaboration of economic theory applied to land and resource policy that took place in this period there tended to develop a schism between those who admired the internal logic of theory, or beauty of emerging methodologies, and those who defined their role as the solving of "practical problems." Although the arguments between these groups resulted occasionally in more heat than light, in the main the field of resource economics attained more vigor as a result.

The development of public policy analysis in the university was aided by an acceptance of a particular role of the Land Grant University in a democratic society. This role accepted a pluralist view of the democratic political process. As Burrows points out, the pluralist view holds there are many individual interests, interest groups, and decision-makers with potentially conflicting interests.[4] Public policy decisions are viewed as compromises among these divergent interests, thus there is no single public interest and no optimal policy choice. Scientific knowledge and analysis cannot determine the "correct" policy choice because science cannot supply the judgments about values that ranks one interest as more important than other interests. These ideas along with acceptance of a problem solving procedure led the formulation of the "issues, alternatives and consequences" approach to policy research and education. The style of research and education which included (a) issue definition; (b) identification of alternative solutions; and (c) determination of the consequences was found to be compatible with the pluralist views of the democratic political process and to give a useful role for the university which would enable the researcher or extension worker to come back another day to work on other issues with support from most of the interests.

Today's Environment

With the above introduction let us explore the features of today's environment that affect the role of the scholar in relation to public policy.

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[4]Burrows, Richard. Public Policy Education. North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 203.

The impact of college of agriculture scholars in Congress has been more a function of their influence with interest groups and the general public than anything else. Much of the influence and impact depends on a willingness of scholars to "mix it" with interest groups, testify before Congress, and position their ideas so the general public receives and understands them. The impact on an administration at the federal level appears to be a function of time and effort spent working with the administration. Scholars such as Paarlberg or Cochran had much more influence when they were members of a particular administration. Few scholars have had much direct influence at the federal level through their published analysis.

A growth in the number of legislative aides for members of Congress and number of staff on congressional committees provides new opportunities for scholars. These aides and staff are usually bright, eager and young. A few are your graduates but many have little knowledge and experience of natural resources and agriculture. They, as do scholars at universities, seek to achieve national interest but from the perspective of a particular state or district. They often find relationships with scholars from their member's state useful and productive. Scholars interested in policy could well cultivate relationships with this group of people.

An important difference in the public policy arena today compared to the past as far as resource policy is concerned is the expanding role of the statehouse. Recent legislation by the Federal government has thrown more responsibility for natural

resource development to the states. Increasing population and volume of economic activity have enhanced the policy issues relating to natural resource development and use. Water becomes scarcer, and the competition for it increases. The competition between urban and rural sectors for land becomes keener. Concerns about environmental issues descend to overlie all of the natural resources. Block grants from congress to the states have provided the latter with more muscle in initiating policies. Thus the prediction of the 1950s and the "death of the states" never came to pass; instead, the states have developed additional tax bases, increased greatly the number of professionally trained employees, and have developed an attitude in both legislatures and executive offices to grapple with policy issues beyond those of roads, schools, and public safety.

Legislatures and executive agencies have been staffed with large numbers and a variety of trained, vigorous, critical, young analysts. The ferment and dynamics of the state represent a demand for policy information that did not exist in times past. Whether this demand is well served by academe is another matter; however, much more energy is being applied today in statehouses to issue definition and developing notions of priority than was formerly true.

A revolutionary factor in the statehouse environment is the computer. It enables legislative committees, fiscal analysts, and administrative agencies to "crunch" data in volumes and with sophistication not visualized in the wildest dreams twenty years ago. Thus modeling of physical and economic variables has become standard procedure. Policy alternatives can be tested speedily

and economically where basic data are available. University agencies formerly provided much of these basic sorts of analysis. Now, statehouse agencies can "grow their own" in many cases.

Thus the ability of the statehouse, as well as the university, to produce information has been enhanced greatly, and the demand for information has grown apace. However, whether our ability to use such information, to synthesize it, to provide a context for it, and to employ it meaningfully in policy formation, has likewise increased is a matter of conjecture.

The policy analyst specialist confronts an important environmental difference in carrying on educational work at the national level, as compared to the state level. At the national level preparations can be advanced and issues aired in debates and discussions that can be vigorous at times, after which we retreat to the safety and protection of the state university. On the other hand, the potential for visibility is much greater at the state level, which can be the source of risk to both the specialist and the university. We do not suggest that this existence of risk is an argument for withholding policy assistance by university staff. It does suggest the importance of defining the rights and responsibilities of scholars in this type of activity, and some measure of understanding between scholars and the community in this regard.

Another dimension of public policy research and education is the citizenry. Citizens are exposed to much more information, and more rapidly, through more media, than could have been visualized even two decades ago. In consequence, they are

presumably better informed concerning the rudiments of public policy. As democratic philosophy would suggest, all political power of elected and appointed offices does derive from the citizen. Mr. Nixon discovered to his chagrin that when enough citizens, perhaps not even a majority, withhold their validation of this power, the only alternative is to resign. Do they not represent a larger demand for public policy education than their peers of the past? Are not the means of serving this demand greatly enhanced by the new communications technology?

The University as a Corporate Body in Relation to Public Policy

We can enumerate some pluses and some minuses in viewing the university as an agency providing assistance in relation to public policy. In the first place, the university does not appear to present institutional obstacles in this area, as might have been true in another time. Faculty rights and responsibilities have been clarified and are rather well understood and appreciated in the whole university community. Academic freedom is no longer a common concern among faculty engaged in public policy work. Governing boards better understand the role of the scholar not only in the classroom and the research laboratory, but also as an informal teacher and advisor on policy matters. In fact, members of governing boards can even "wax prideful" concerning the services rendered by a member of their faculty in some public policy activity.

Outside pressure on university boards or administrative officers in relation to public policy activities of members of their staff is less of an issue now than in the past. When it

occurs, the result is more apt to be objective feedback without emotion, instead some of the thoughtless, "kneejerk" reactions that have occurred in the past. Another positive factor is the probable fact that academic freedom and responsibility, and the distinction between the institution as a corporate entity and the scholar as an expert in his own right, are better understood by the lay public.

Another positive factor today with respect to public policy activity by university scholars is the existence of more orderly, systematic and objective approaches of evaluation for purposes of pay, promotion, and tenure. How is this? Evaluation of performance is today quite institutionalized, rather than being the province of a few individuals operating informally. It involves peers, department heads, deans, vice chancellors, and includes appraisal of not only teaching and research, but extension and service activities. It does not rely on "critical incidents", but on the achievement of a cumulative record. Informal public policy activity by staff will not be ignored in staff evaluation, but will be routinely included as part of the evaluation process. Whether sufficient recognition for such activity is actually being given can be argued, but there has been improvement.

How well is the University equipped to serve the public policy needs of the state and its citizens? The answer to that question depends upon which role. In terms of resident instruction at the under-graduate and graduate levels we assume that the University is responding to the demand. The University

has been criticized in times past for emphasizing the physical and biological sciences to the detriment of the social sciences, and more specifically agricultural economics, and even more specifically resource economics. Part of the difficulty at this point was probably inertia or slowness in responding to changing student demands. We believe that response time has been shortened recently because of more vigorous demand by students, and also broader appreciation by agricultural administrators for the social sciences as necessary components of student training.

Similarly, the demand for extension teaching on the part of clientele--farmers and others--has increased greatly in recent decades, and scholars and administrators have tended to be responsive. Illustrative at Nebraska have been the addition of professional staff in areas of water economics, hydrology, water law, and environment in agriculture in recent years. We believe that the demand for extension activity in this area will continue to grow in the future, with the increasing complexity and severity of natural resource problems. Through the field organization of the Cooperative Extension Service the needs enunciated by clientele of that agency are recorded efficiently; the Extension Service is quite sensitive in attempting to be responsive. Experience suggests that the Extension Service clientele will be asking for and expecting educational program in the resource policy area.

The effectiveness of the university research enterprise in the resources area in serving public policy needs has tended to be cyclical, for several reasons. Like the traditional notion of "the teachable moment" the receptivity of the users of policy

information to research results fluctuates with the urgency of the issues that they confront. Successes can be noted in the areas of soil conservation, property taxation, water policy, and certain issues of environmental policy. If research scholars, anticipating the emergence of these topics as issues, were ready with research findings at the moment of need, the result was "success".

In a more philosophic vein Glenn Johnson has discussed the affect of loyalties and chauvinism on the university research enterprise.[8] He suggests that if research is to serve its clientele in the next half century, a "new covenant" will be needed between practically oriented problem-solving research, subject matter research, and conceptually oriented disciplinary research. Such a covenant, and a compromise between the respective chauvinisms of the groups conducting these classes of research, would have the objective of exploiting the complementariness between them to the gain of the users of research.

The university is not often well enough organized to service the need for resource policy represented by the current situation in the statehouse. There are exceptions, of course. One of the roles of the water resources research centers is to promote discussion of water policy issues. Considerable beneficial activity has been carried on under these auspices. In fact at the University of Nebraska we are organizing a new University

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[8]Glenn L. Johnson. Academia needs a new covenant for serving agriculture. Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Stations Special Publication, July 1984, p. 9.

wide committee representing in a sense an elaboration of the Water Resources Research Center which will serve to bring together people from all three campuses to seminar on water issues. These persons will also represent a pool of talent available to the statehouse for consultation on water policy.

However, there are too few functional mechanisms within any university for pulling into focus the many policy-related activities that are pursued by its staff. A university community, centered around individual and relatively independent scholars, does not lend itself to organization on other than departmental lines. Where such organizations do exist they are often understaffed and underfunded for effective information transfer or ready provision of staff resources when they are most needed.

We must note, at the same time, that there is insufficient recognition in the statehouse of university resources that are available on policy issues, including results of research or qualified staff who can be enlisted as participants or interactors in the process of policy formation.

What we need is an organized mechanism that would bring university policy scholars and statehouse decision makers together on a continuing basis to define issues, to discuss research results, and to analyze alternative means of solving problems. Such a device, which might be called a policy center, might be funded from non-public sources, might be associated with but not be part of the university, and might desirably have its own resources which could be used to support university scholars

as consultants or in specific research efforts. This idea is posed simply to stimulate your thoughts; other approaches will certainly occur to you.

Some Final Observations

We close where we started - What is the role of public policy research and education in the university, and concomitantly, what is the role of the scholar in policy formation? We have touched on the institutional features of the contemporary university in relation to the topic. Now, let us address the individual scholar interested in resources policy, his role, his opportunities, and the obstacles he may confront.

1. The experienced scientist who has taught, done research, and practiced in his subject matter area, and who "knows his mind" is a rare commodity.
2. There is a great need by policymakers for information on the consequences of alternative actions; the challenge is how to convert this need into "demand"!
3. It is a neat trick to identify tomorrow's issues and to design research to answer them, rather than to investigate yesterday's problems.
4. There is a great need for synthesis; the academic who can reach into related subject matter areas and integrate information from them in a framework of issues, alternatives, and consequences will be well acclaimed. (We note another kind of synthesis of great value to the scholar - that of drawing implications from related fields to one's own work.)

5. Objectively and evenhandedness--both difficult to define--are absolutely essential in the policy arena.
6. A scholar's predictably pet preoccupations, or perceptibly subjective values, are usually readily discerned and not well received. This is not to be interpreted as criticism of research on values, but rather aimed at the baggage of values with which we are all equipped.
7. Users of policy research in the Congress, in the statehouse, or in interest groups react with a yawn to scholarly confrontations over narrow issues of theory or minute issues of methodology. Let us hasten to add, however, that meaningful research does require the application of the best possible theory and methods.

We leave you with some final perceptions that stem from our own experiences and observations. First, we would underline the importance of discrimination. Not all issues lend themselves to neat problem-solving approaches. The solution to some problems may be a continuation of the same conditions, or continued conflict, or new problems. This great selectivity is called for in the commitment of our own efforts to problems which lend themselves to being "solved". Second, we would stress the self evident importance of survival; if one is to survive in the policy making milieu one must retain a degree of usefulness to all parties concerned. Anderson's view of a scholar as a "partisan of the neglected perspective" is a creative form of this idea. As you know only too well, the posing of questions is an effective teaching device, and fundamentally we are discussing teaching activity.

However, we are skeptical about some of the other approaches suggested by Anderson, as well as Rein and White. We do return to the "issues, alternatives, and consequences" approach with which we started as a useful, pragmatic, and effective framework for participation in the policy process.

The framework allows the scholar to return to the same audience on another issue on another day.

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(1) From the Chronicle of Higher Education. Vol. XXIX, No. 3, September 12, 1984, pp. 5 & 10.

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(3) Harry C. McDean. Professionalism in the Rural Social Sciences 1896-1919. Agricultural History, pp. 373-92.

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