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Problems and Potentials of Agricultural Economics Extension

Everett E. Peterson

This session on *Problems and Potentials of Agricultural Economics Extension* shows continuing concern over the relevance of agricultural economics extension and research in the current socio-economic setting. This concern has existed since the beginning of agricultural economics as a discipline, but has intensified since 1970. Inclusion of this topic on the program of this W.A.E.A. meeting is also an example of overdue efforts to increase the interest and involvement of extension economists in professional associations and to bridge the widening gap between agricultural economics research and extension.

Our soul-searching at this time is stimulated by the problems resulting from great political, economic and social changes in America and worldwide since 1970. People are questioning basic American values and developing new value systems. The impact on land grant universities is well summarized by paraphrasing Dr. Wallace's three central questions: 1) Is the system, which worked well before 1970, adequate to serve the nation's people in the last quarter of this century and beyond? 2) Should Colleges or Institutes of Agriculture avoid most of the above problems by limiting research and extension programs (including agricultural economics) to producing and marketing food? 3) If the answer to question 2 is "No" and the decision by administrators with courage and leadership qualities is for continued and deeper involvement in human and natural resource development issues, what changes are necessary within the universities to respond to newer, broader concerns of society?

Background

Historical review of basic federal legisla-

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tion relating to land grant universities provides a useful jogging of our memories. The important concept in the sequential development is that the Cooperative Extension Service was established to extend results of research to those who could apply them, i.e., research is supposed to solve problems which concern people. Some critics, including this commentator, feel that many researchers have forgotten this or choose to ignore it because of present criteria for professional advancement. In my opinion, any broadening of the scope of research and extension programs beyond producing and marketing food has been more in response to external political pressures than to farsighted leadership among agricultural college administrators. Another powerful influence has been that the east wind periodically wafts the sweet smell of federal dollars to the noses of these officials.

Pressures for change come from urban taxpayers, low-income and minority groups, consumers, environmentalists — groups outside the traditional "agricultural establishment." Our traditional clientele seek to maintain their present favored position as to access to research and extension programs; they oppose change. The response of many agricultural colleges has been defensive, a recitation of past achievements; but examples of positive responses can be found: for example, "Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture?" and "Your Food." The concerns of non-traditional clientele are legitimate and can no longer be ignored. Our choices are to meet their needs through established procedures, to be told to do so by legislative mandate, or be by-passed.

Within the university system, most agricultural economics departments face competitive disadvantages in obtaining funds be-

cause they lack politically powerful off-campus constituencies. Farm management and marketing are more likely to be recognized and adequately supported than public affairs and community resource development which are still "on probation" and "searching for identity" in the current socio-economic environment. Also the latter two subject matter areas deal with politically sensitive issues. Research and extension programs on such issues may lead to criticism of the university which makes many administrators uncomfortable. But university administrators are not paid higher salaries to lead comfortable lives but rather to make hard decisions and take some risks.

Problems

A brief listing of problem areas shows that the need for agricultural economics extension programs is tremendous, almost overwhelming. Demand is derived from dissatisfaction with firm or institutional performance, from perceived need for changes to cope with economic, social and political problems, and from desire for better performance. Demand is made effective by consumers' willingness to spend scarce time and money to become more educated and so gain personal satisfaction, improved economic status and better institutional performance, and by their ability to exert economic and political pressure on suppliers of agricultural economics education.

This product (agricultural economics education) will not sell unless it has an interested "student body." But these students are problem-oriented volunteers who can't be coerced into attending "school." Researchers are less concerned about this than extension economists because professional journals are often regarded as the primary market for research results.

The quantity of economic education supplied is a function of: the existing economic, social and political climate; administrators' evaluation and judgment as to risks of involvement and non-involvement; competi-

tion for scarce resources; and availability of competent staff.

I wish to underscore Wallace's comments on the widening gap between agricultural research and extension needs. Researchers have accurately sized up the pay-off from publishing articles in professional journals, even though this means limiting the market for research results to colleagues in other universities. As stated by one writer on the relevance of agricultural economics, "In the current vernacular, their intellectual 'high' seems to attain a level of satisfaction through quantitative analyses of masses of data, which provide the opportunity for constructing economic models, utilizing computers, and thus keeping busy without bothering anyone." [Scroggs] I would argue that extension economists save most agricultural economics departments from virtual isolation from the real world.

Within some departments, the attitude still prevails that extension is the "employer of last resort" for those who can't make the grade in teaching and research. Extension economists have not yet overcome the stigma that they are less well trained than research economists. This has some historical basis, a holdover from the days when county agents were "retreaded" to become specialists. A major institutional problem for many extension economists is the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the performance evaluation process. Department heads try to apply the same criteria as for research and teaching staff. Extension directors tend to look at number of meetings and attendance, miles travelled, personal contacts, feed-back from county agents and agricultural leaders, and program results measured in dollar terms. Participation by extension economists in national and regional extension projects and on university committees are regarded as extra-curricular activities which "cause state programs to suffer."

Possible Solutions

Like with God, mother and country, it's

hard to disagree with the broad generalizations in this section, but difficult to apply them. This is due in part to the wide variation among states as to problems and resources. Agricultural economics has a broad base of support in a few states, very little in most. Examples of multidisciplinary approaches to major issues are also few and far between.

The potentials and boundaries of extension programs appear to be quite well defined in production economics, marketing and agribusiness, and natural resource use and control. The nature and scope of our responsibilities for off-campus educational activities in public affairs and community resource development are less clear. This is demonstrated by the wide range of issues discussed over the past twenty years at the National Public Policy Education Conference. Obviously public affairs and CRD specialists can't be all things to all people; they must decide on program priorities. Strong administrative support is needed for this purpose and for access to needed expertise in other colleges.

Some additional suggestions for improving the effectiveness of agricultural economics extension programs are:

1. Strengthening staff training programs through (a) more emphasis on extension career opportunities at the undergraduate level; (b) establishing extension graduate assistantships and internships in universities, industry and government with the same status as research and teaching assistantships;
2. Requiring participation by specialists in appropriate regional and national conferences, workshops and seminars for in-service training and continuing education;
3. Encouraging specialists to serve on regional and national committees to de-

velop educational materials and programs on problems common to more than one state through administrative sanction and financial support of such projects;

4. Using the team approach to multidisciplinary problems through (a) mutual agreement and cooperation, (b) administrative leadership and direction, (c) allocation of funds for honoraria and summer appointments, and (d) extending the agricultural college model to the total university. Appropriate procedures for recognition of contributions of team members to the joint effort must be established to minimize such feelings as "I did all the work but he got all the credit."

Concluding Statement

As a battle-scarred veteran of twenty-five years as an extension specialist in public affairs education, my advice to younger extension economists is to: 1) *Keep trying* to communicate research needs to researchers despite limited success in the past, to work with them so that research results can be presented to managers and policy makers in an understandable and usable manner; 2) *Listen* to colleagues and clientele, including non-traditional customers, to identify their concerns; and 3) *Anticipate* problems and determine how our expertise can help solve these problems.

References

Scroggs, Claud L., "The Relevance of University Research and Extension Activities in Agricultural Economics to Agribusiness Firms," *Am. Journal of Ag. Econ.*, 57(1975): 883-888.

See *Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies, 1958-77*, Farm Foundation, Chicago, Illinois.

