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"WHAT IS AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS?"

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HOW TO REINVENT AN UNDERSTANDING OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS DEPARTMENTS [*]

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Given the time limit, I will confine my comments to one area of importance, resident instruction. My colleagues on the panel will address other areas. I will emphasize the "how" in the title by suggesting some ways AAEA may be helpful to departments as they consider the reinvention of resident instruction programs at the undergraduate and masters levels.

While I agree with Dan Bromley that departments of agricultural economics can increase their credit hours taught by offering courses that enlighten nonmajors on how economists think, I am not convinced that service teaching of this type does much to ensure long-run survivability of a department. The excellent service courses and the faculty offering them can be transferred to the economics, natural resources or other departments when the decision is made to close down agricultural economics. Thus I agree departments should seek and reward good service teaching, but they should not assume it will do much to ensure their survival over the long run.

The availability of viable undergraduate majors is important to the public and hence to the University. These majors and the units, (departments, colleges, divisions, or whatever) offering them may be restructured and reinvented, but universities will continue to offer majors. Thus I argue the long-term viability of agricultural economic departments can be enhanced by being closely associated with a viable undergraduate major. More specifically, long-term viability of agricultural economics departments in many universities is closely tied to maintaining undergraduate majors that recruit highly qualified students, provide training that prepares students for job opportunities in the rural and food sectors, and places students in economically viable positions. Many employers prefer students with a masters degree. Thus maintaining a viable masters program may also be important to viability.

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Some Observations

1. Many of our graduates find jobs in the agricultural and food sectors. The growth areas for employment are expected to be in agricultural services, wholesaling and retailing. The demand in food manufacturing is expected to be level, while the demand in other areas, including the public sector, is expected to be down. [1]

   We need to be sure that we are preparing students for jobs in the total food system. Some departments have emphasized training on wholesaling and retailing, but many have not.

2. Employers have told us they want employees to have good technical skills, but they also want them to have many other skills. A partial list of the goals (or learner objectives) we have developed for undergraduate majors from discussions with employers at the University of Minnesota is given below. The items on this list are probably very similar to those you have obtained from employers.

   Our experience at Minnesota suggests the characteristics on this list have not changed much over the past 10 years, but the level of attainment in many of these areas is increasing. For example, several business CEOs interviewed about important characteristics of bachelors' graduates indicated they expect new hires' to be sufficiently familiar with the to locate needed data sources on their own, download data, conduct routine business analyses needed and present the results using presentation software. These are new skills being demanded today that would not have been expected 2 or more years ago.

   Employers have told us they want graduates to be able to:

   - apply technical skills in economics, business and data analysis.
   - communicate effectively and to use communication technology.
   - work effectively as a member of a team.
   - manage human resources and provide leadership.

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[1] Franklin, James C., "The American Work-Force 1992-2005: Industry Output and Employment," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1993, pp. 41-57.

- evaluate and integrate diverse viewpoints.
- make responsible judgements on ethical and policy issues.
- apply global perspectives to food and agricultural issues.

3. We have a relatively small number of graduates per year. The number of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business Management degrees in 1991-92 was 3,349 at the B.S. level, 534 at the M.S. level and 139 at the Ph.D.[1] The major competition our B.S. and M.S. graduates face in obtaining jobs is from majors in economics, business schools, liberal arts, and other departments in the College of Agriculture. Many agricultural economics departments are already known within their universities and states for their excellent undergraduate advising and instruction. We have the opportunity to build on their strengths and to make our B.S. and M.S. degrees more competitive. There are many ways we could work together through AAEA to structure activities that would help all departments to structure their resident instruction programs at the B.S. and M.S. levels. These activities could be organized and coordinated by the Resident Instruction Committee.

The opportunities for AAEA to facilitate the reinvention process with respect to B.S. and M.S. programs include:

- identify learner outcomes to be achieved by strong A.E. and ABM programs.
- develop a model curriculum to use as a benchmark.
- discuss the content and teaching activities to be included in individual courses.
- discuss appropriate use of teaching methods and new technology.
- evaluate use of internships and mentoring.
- facilitate strengthening resident instruction programs when resources to hire faculty and buy equipment are limited.
- identify methods to recruit strong students.
- provide potential employers with information on the skills graduates possess.

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[1] Litzenberg, Kerry, "Abridged Fall 1992 National Enrollment Report," *NACTA Journal,* June 1993, pp. 4-11.