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The Southern Agricultural Economics Association's Declining Membership

Richard L. Kilmer

It is indeed a pleasure to be standing here today addressing you as your president. When Bill Park called me to ask whether I would run for president of the Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA), I said yes. He said, "don't you want a day or two to think about it?" I said, "Bill, I have been in this profession for 27 years; I do not want to wait another 27 years for the opportunity. You can do the math."

I am concerned about the declining membership of our association. From a high of 1,113 members in 1987 to a low of 543 in 2003 (Figure 1), the overall trend is in the downward direction. From calendar year 2002 to calendar year 2003, our membership dropped 19.7%! These facts are unsettling to me, and I know they are to you.

I will share with you today some thoughts about what is occurring, why it is occurring, and what we might be able to do about the decline in membership. I will review who we

are demographically as an association and will present the state of our association and the state of other regional associations and our national association. Then, I will discuss what may have caused the decline in membership since 1987. Finally, I will offer some suggestions that may stem or, at least slow, the decline in membership.

The SAEA in 2003

In 2003, the SAEA had 543 members plus 158 library subscriptions, for a total of 701 (Table 1). The 16 southern states plus the Washington, D.C., area had 371 members, or 68.3% of the total members, not including libraries. The remaining states and international members contributed 142 and 30 memberships, respectively, or 26.2% and 5.5% of the total members. We have members in 29 states outside the South. Only the states of Delaware, Maine, Oregon, and Vermont were without SAEA members among the 48 contiguous states (Tables 1 and 2).

Of the 29 states outside the southern region, four have double-digit numbers of members. Kansas has the most members at 21, followed by Illinois with 18, Missouri with 13, and Ohio with 10 (Table 2). These states border one or more of the 16 southern states. Furthermore, if you add to these four states the other states that border southern states, which include Colorado, Indiana, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania, these eight states represent 76 members, or 53.5% of the SAEA members who reside in states other than the southern states. International members come from 13 different countries and total 30 SAEA mem-

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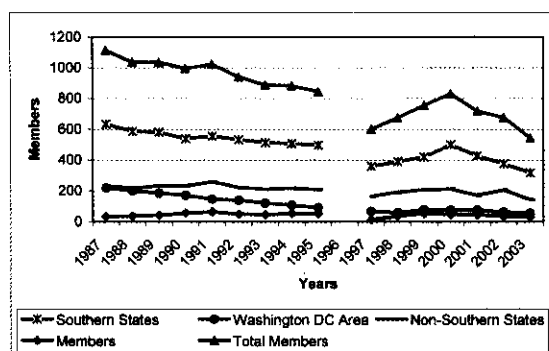


Figure 1. Southern Agricultural Economics Association Non-Library Membership by Location, 1987–2003 (Source: Various issues of the *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics* and the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*)

bers. Countries with more than one member include Canada (9), Japan (6), South Korea (4), and Taiwan (2).

Beyond the geographic characteristics of the SAEA membership, we have 15 charter members, 22 honorary members, 476 regular members, and 30 student members, for a total membership of 543, excluding libraries. Of the 543 nonlibrary members, 460 are associated with 105 universities (85 U.S. and 20 international). Of the remaining 83 nonlibrary members, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is represented by 32 SAEA members, 18 SAEA members are associated with 15 private companies, and the remaining members have other affiliations or only list a mailing address. Libraries that subscribe to the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics (JAAE)* represent 158 memberships. Last year, 178 regular members (32.7%) attended the annual meeting, which was held in Mobile, Alabama. Finally, 78.3% of the SAEA members are also members of the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). So, that is who we were in 2003.

The State of the SAEA

Now, let us look at the trends in our membership. The charter members in the SAEA numbered 519 in 1968. Membership trended up-

ward until 1987, when the SAEA membership reached a peak of 1,113 nonlibrary members (Figure 1). Since 1987, the trend has been downward. By 1997, there were only 600 members. The exception to the downward trend was a 3-year rally in membership between 1998 and 2000, for a total of 830 members. Since 2000, SAEA membership has dropped to 543. This is a 51.2% decrease since 1987 (Table 1). The Washington, D.C., area membership (Delaware, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia) decreased from 218 in 1987 to 55 in 2003 (a 74.8% decline). The southern states have mirrored the results of the total membership by declining 50% over the same time period, which represents 316 members lost (Figure 1). Numbers of nonsouthern and international members have trended downward by 38.3% (88 members) and 9.1% (3 members), respectively. The southern states represent about 58% of the SAEA membership. From 1987 to 2003, the nonsouthern states (other states) and international memberships increased 5% and 3%, respectively, whereas the Washington, D.C., area membership decreased 10% (Figure 2).

The State of Other Associations

Agricultural Economics Associations

To put our numbers in context, it is helpful to compare our experience with those of other agricultural economics and general economics associations. The AAEA has shown a similar downward trend starting in 1987 (Figure 3). After starting with 561 members in 1919, the AAEA reached its highest membership in 1987 with 4,934 members, and then trended downward to 2,893 members in 2003. Since 1987, the AAEA membership has decreased by 41.3%. President Jon Brandt, in his presidential address at the 2003 AAEA annual meetings in Montreal, Canada, suggested raising membership dues by \$50 (from \$100 to \$150) in order for the AAEA to remain solvent in the future. It remains to be seen how many members will be lost with this increase in membership dues. The AAEA believes that membership demand is very inelastic. Sieg-

Table 1. Southern Agricultural Economics Association Members by Affiliation, 1987 through 2003

State	Members																
	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Alabama	52	49	39	37	44	41	35	43	34	—	29	18	23	34	26	18	24
Arkansas	29	24	27	28	26	28	28	27	29	—	25	29	30	31	23	21	21
Florida	73	75	72	74	64	59	67	64	58	—	40	40	54	52	57	48	34
Georgia	66	55	62	58	50	45	43	44	49	—	35	30	37	40	40	38	27
Kentucky	45	39	44	34	38	43	34	38	30	—	19	33	35	45	29	13	21
Louisiana	41	45	36	32	33	28	22	22	21	—	25	29	27	32	27	21	26
Mississippi	38	33	37	34	31	34	27	29	30	—	25	35	23	41	22	16	16
North Carolina	45	49	53	46	48	35	40	40	45	—	35	29	40	34	33	26	21
Oklahoma	49	39	40	45	51	52	55	43	40	—	28	30	34	39	26	39	21
South Carolina	48	41	29	24	28	25	21	20	25	—	13	16	14	25	40	43	12
Tennessee	49	41	41	31	29	37	36	44	44	—	28	28	27	34	28	23	25
Texas	91	93	96	90	108	98	99	87	87	—	53	68	71	85	72	64	63
West Virginia	6	2	3	5	5	6	6	6	4	—	4	3	3	6	3	5	5
Subtotal	632	585	579	538	555	531	513	507	496	—	359	388	418	498	426	375	316
Percent of total	57	56	56	54	54	56	58	57	59	—	60	58	55	60	59	55	58
Delaware	6	4	6	6	6	8	5	3	6	—	3	1	1	0	1	2	0
Washington, D.C.	72	66	57	43	45	45	39	34	26	—	25	21	32	32	37	33	28
Maryland	34	23	22	32	23	19	20	13	14	—	9	2	11	7	4	2	3
Virginia	106	106	99	90	72	67	56	57	44	—	29	35	33	36	33	25	24
Subtotal	218	199	184	171	146	139	120	107	90	—	66	59	77	75	75	62	55
Percent of total	20	19	18	17	14	15	14	12	11	—	11	9	10	9	10	9	10
Other states	230	216	231	231	257	221	209	216	207	—	163	190	206	210	170	204	142
Percent of total	21	21	22	23	25	24	24	24	25	—	27	28	27	25	24	30	26
International	33	37	42	55	64	49	45	53	50	—	12	37	53	47	45	35	30
Percent of total	3	4	4	6	6	5	5	6	6	—	2	5	7	6	6	5	6
Total members	1,113	1,037	1,036	995	1,022	940	887	883	843	—	600	674	754	830	716	676	543
Library	166	158	161	175	178	173	179	181	170	—	156	174	148	184	181	159	158
Total members	1,279	1,195	1,197	1,170	1,200	1,113	1,066	1,064	1,013	—	756	848	902	1,014	897	835	701

Source: Various issues of the *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics* and the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*.

Table 2. Non Southern States and Country Membership in 2003

State	Members	State	Members
Arizona	8	Nebraska	3
California	5	New Hampshire	1
Colorado	3	New Jersey	1
Connecticut	4	New Mexico	3
Iowa	5	Nevada	1
Idaho	2	New York	4
Illinois	18	Ohio	10
Indiana	7	Pennsylvania	1
Kansas	21	Rhode Island	2
Massachusetts	1	South Dakota	1
Michigan	7	Utah	4
Minnesota	4	Washington	2
Missouri	13	Wisconsin	4
Montana	2	Wyoming	3
North Dakota	2		
Country		Country	
Australia	1	Senegal	1
Canada	9	Spain	1
Germany	1	Sweden	1
Hungary	1	Taiwan	2
Japan	6	Ukraine	1
Korea (South)	4	United Kingdom	1
Norway	1		

Source: The Southern Agricultural Economics Association Membership Records.

fried (2002) found this to be true for the American Economic Association (-0.25), the Southern Economic Association (-0.27), and the Western Economic Association (-0.59).

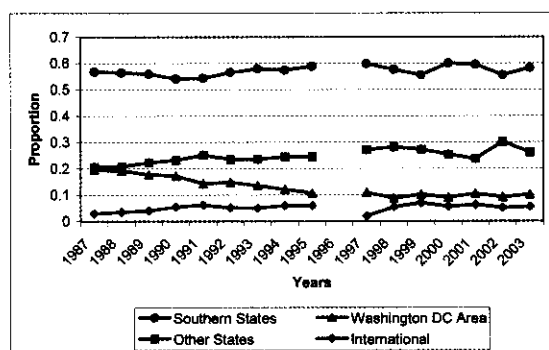


Figure 2. The Percentage of the Southern Agricultural Economics Association Non-Library Membership by Location, 1987–2003 (Source: Various issues of the *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics* and the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*)

The Western Agricultural Economics Association (WAEA) has also shown a similar trend since 1987 (Figure 3). WAEA membership peaked at 1,026 in 1987 before trending downward to 637 in 2003, a decrease of 37.9%. The exception was a 3-year increase to 743 members between 1999 and 2001.

In contrast, the Northeastern Agricultural and Resource Economics Association's (NAREA) experience has been different from that of the other associations (Figure 3). NAREA membership peaked in 1982 at 433 members before it declined sharply to 362 members in 1983, remaining reasonably steady since. There were 354 members in 2003.

Economics Associations

The American Economic Association reached a peak membership in 1993 of 22,005 members (Siegfried 1998) before trending downward to 19,461 members in 2003, an 11.6%

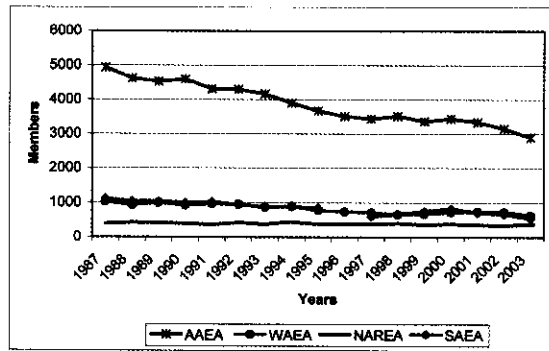


Figure 3. The American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA), Northeastern Agricultural and Resource Economics Association (NAREA), Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA), and the Western Agricultural Economics Association (WAEA) Non-Library Membership, 1987–2003 (Source: AAEA and WAEA membership numbers from unpublished membership records; NAREA from various issues of the *Northeastern Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*; and SAEA from various issues of the *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics* and the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*)

decrease (American Economic Association). However, from 1987 through 2003, the American Economic Association's membership only declined 3.1%. Regional memberships have also declined. Membership in the Southern Economic Association has declined 25% since 1974, the Western Economic Association has declined 15% since 1982, and the Midwest Economics Association has declined by two-thirds since 1982.

Possible Causes of the Decline

What do the literature and employment data tell us about the possible causes of these disturbing trends?

Literature Review

Segarra surveyed SAEA members in June of 1997 and asked them the following six questions:

1. Why was the SAEA formed?
2. What was the effect of SAEA meetings on professional development?
3. What are the effects of the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* on professional development?
4. What is the relevance of SAEA activities?
5. What should be done to position the SAEA in the future?
6. What is the future of the profession?

Segarra found that the SAEA was performing very well in most cases. However, he also found that the SAEA needs to be more sensitive to (1) teaching-related and extension-related activities at the annual meetings, (2) relationships with the agricultural industry, (3) strengthening multidisciplinary programs, (4) certain awards (such as masters thesis and Ph.D. dissertation awards), (5) nontraditional areas, (6) location and time of year for the annual meetings, (7) the format of the annual meetings, and (8) problem solving activities (i.e., too much disciplinary focus). Although several of these recommendations have been addressed by the SAEA, they deserve a second look to determine what remains to be addressed.

Unnevehr and Mittelhammer recently explained why the AAEA membership has been declining since 1987. They collected membership data on AAEA members for 1991 and 2003 concerning activities, location, type of employer, and field of interest. They also supplemented this AAEA information with information from a project at Kansas State University dealing with new Ph.D. graduates in agricultural economics. They found that the number of Ph.D. degrees granted in agricultural economics has decreased modestly in the past 5 years. Furthermore, the number of AAEA members who recently received Ph.D. degrees has decreased sharply. They concluded that the AAEA is capturing a smaller proportion of a declining market.

In addition, Unnevehr and Mittelhammer found that interests in agricultural price analysis, agricultural income analysis, and agricultural policy analysis have decreased, whereas interests in environmental economics,

natural resource economics, international trade, and development have increased dramatically. Finally, they found evidence of greater membership losses among non-Ph.D. graduates, those not employed by universities, and those living outside the United States. These findings support Segarra's findings about the need for the annual meetings, and possibly publications, to embrace a broader agenda.

Siegfried (2002) surveyed 808 former members of the Midwest Economics Association, Southern Economic Association, and Western Economic Association in 2000. These former members of the three regional associations had failed to renew their memberships in the late 1990s. Of those surveyed, 253 (31%) responded. Reasons for dropping the regional associations were (1) 38.2% did not participate in the regional conference, (2) 21.7% substituted alternative associations, (3) 78.3% substituted no association, (4) 10.9% quit because of the quality of conference papers, (5) 10.5% changed jobs or moved, and (6) 7.9% retired. Of the 21.7% who substituted alternative associations, 11.9% joined a field-specific association or subscribed to a specific journal, 4.7% joined another regional economics association, and 5.1% joined smaller regional associations or their state economics association. The one figure that seems the most disturbing is that 78.3% did not join another association.

Siegfried (2002) found that the price elasticity of demand for membership (annual meeting) relative to a membership fee (annual meeting registration fee) was very inelastic. More specifically, the price elasticity of demand (*, statistically significant at the 0.05 level) for the American Economic Association was -0.25^* (-0.20), the Midwest Economics Association was (-0.12) , the Southern Economic Association was -0.27^* (-0.35^*), and the Western Economic Association was -0.59^* (-0.65).

Finally, Siegfried (2002) found that the annual meeting date and location did make a difference in attendance at the meetings. When the American Economic Association's convention was changed from December or January

to August or September, attendance declined more than 40%. When the American Economic Association meets at locations other than New York City or Washington, D.C., attendance drops by 1,600 people. The American Economic Association's registration in 1999 in New York City was 8,448 participants. If the annual meeting had not been held in New York City, attendance would have dropped 18.9% (1,600 participants). The Midwest Economics Association saw a 17% increase when they met in Chicago instead of other places. Finally, the Southern Economic Association saw a 26% increase when they met in Washington, D.C.

In summary, Siegfried (2002) notes "the lesson to be learned from the survey seems to be that convention size, structure, and the connection of the convention registration fees with association dues are important decisions for the long-term membership vitality of regional associations" (pp. 11–12).

Putnam, a sociologist, wrote a book entitled *Bowling Alone*. He studied U.S. culture and determined that Americans were not joining clubs, associations, churches, etc., as they have in the past. This suggests factors that affect SAEA membership that are beyond our control. It also suggests that we need to be more aggressive in recruiting members for our association, repackaging our meeting content, and scheduling meetings in locations that have been proved to attract a large audience.

Empirical Data

Given that 84.5% of the SAEA membership is associated with universities, let us take a look at what is happening to agricultural economics departments. The average size of agricultural economics departments in the United States (Figure 4), the age distribution of the faculty in the United States (Figures 5 and 6), the average number of Ph.D. students enrolled in the United States (Figure 7), and the revenue picture of Florida (Figure 8) are very informative.

The 22 universities for which the AAEA has data (Table 3) showed a decline in faculty per department, averaging 26.6 faculty per department in 1984 and only 22.1 in 1999 (Fig-

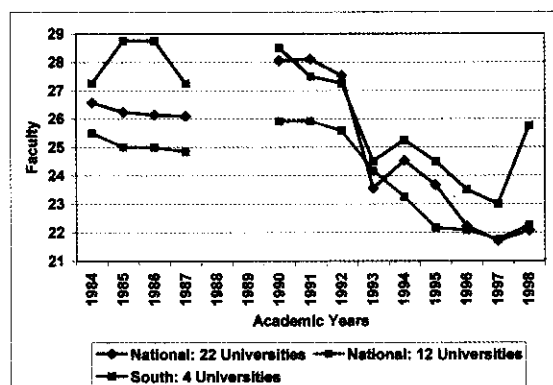


Figure 4. The Average Number of Assistant, Associate, and Full Professors per Agricultural Economics Department in the United States, Various Years (Sources: R.P. Beilock, L.C. Polopolus, and M. Correal, 1984; other years, American Agricultural Economics Association Employment Services Committee Surveys, 1988, 1993, 1996, and 1999)

ure 4), a decline of 16.9%, which is well short of the 51.2% drop in SAEA membership from 1987 through 2003. Of the 22 universities, 8 of them did not report faculty numbers for

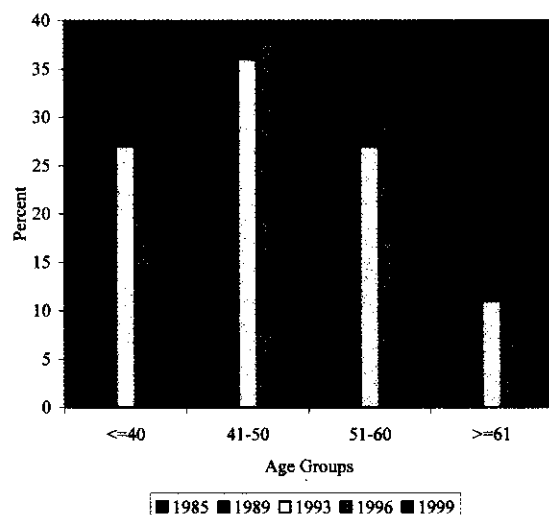


Figure 5. Relative Age Distribution of U.S. Agricultural Economics Faculty (Source: Michele Marra, unpublished paper, data from American Agricultural Economics Association Employment Services Committee Surveys, 1988, 1993, 1996, and 1999)

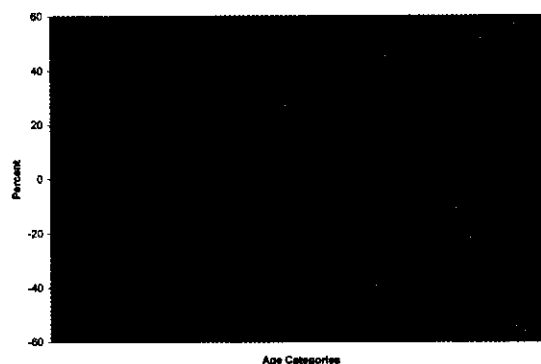


Figure 6. Percentage Change in Age Distribution of U.S. Agricultural Economics Faculty Between 1985 and 1999 (Source: Michele Marra, unpublished paper, data from American Agricultural Economics Association Employment Services Committee Surveys, 1988, 1993, 1996, and 1999)

1996 through 1998, and 2 others had missing years. Eliminating the 10 universities with incomplete data leaves 12 universities with complete data over the time period shown. The average size of agricultural economics faculty at the 12 universities declined 12.5%. The southern universities (Mississippi State University, North Carolina State University, Texas

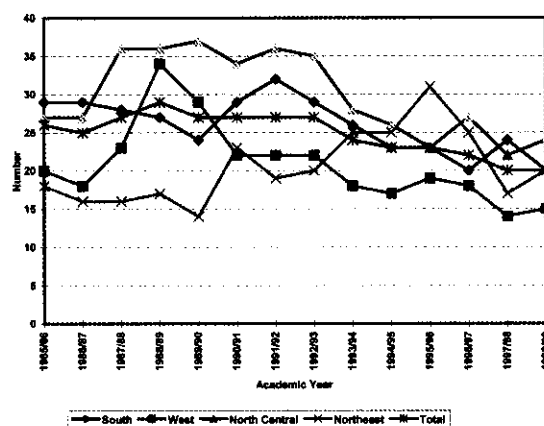


Figure 7. Average Number of Ph.D. Students Enrolled per U.S. Agricultural Economics Department by Region (Source: Michele Marra, unpublished paper, data from American Agricultural Economics Association Employment Services Committee Surveys, 1988, 1993, 1996, and 1999)

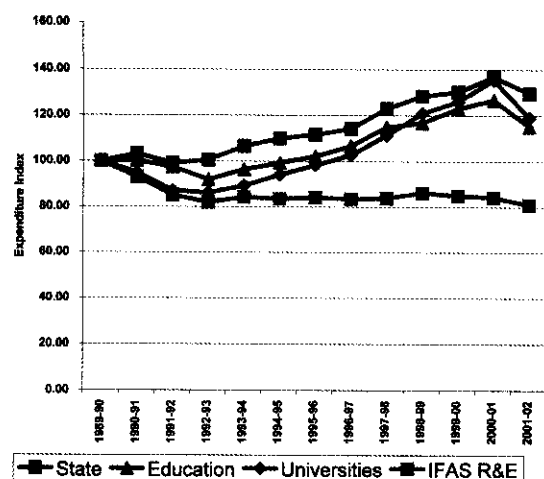


Figure 8. Index of General Revenue and Lottery Expenditures for the State of Florida in Real Dollars (1989–1990 = 100) (Source: Hank Cothran, unpublished paper, data from Florida Final Budget Reports, Schedule of Trust Fund Revenues and History Year Expenditures. For State and Education figures, lottery revenues are reported. For State and Education figures, capital outlay appropriations are included for the 1999–2002 period. All other data reflect operating budget expenditures. IFAS expenditures are for Research and Extension only)

Tech University, and University of Florida) with complete data declined by 1.45 from 1984 through 1998, for an overall decrease of 5.3%. In general, the trend is downward, but the percentage is much less than the decline in SAEA membership.

As faculty age and reach higher ranks, their priorities may change relative to membership in professional associations, attending professional meetings, presenting papers at professional meetings, and publishing journal articles. The percentage of U.S. agricultural economics faculty under the age of 41 decreased steadily from 1985 through 1999 (Figure 5) by 44.1% (Figure 6). The 41 to 50 age group decreased by 2.9%, whereas the 51 to 60 age group increased by 44% and the 61 and older age group increased by 50% (Figures 5 and 6). The majority (52%) of the U.S. agricultural economics faculty is aged 50 or under,

Table 3. Universities Providing Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor Numbers for Various Years

Arizona	North Dakota State
Arkansas (Fayetteville)	Ohio State
Auburn	Oregon State
Colorado State	Penn State
Cornell	Puerto Rico
Florida	Purdue
Georgia	South Dakota State
Kansas State	Southern A&M
Mississippi State	Texas A&M
Nebraska	Texas Tech
North Carolina State	Washington State

Source: American Agricultural Economics Association Employment Services Committee Surveys (1988, 1993, 1996, 1999)

and those under the age of 41 make up 19 percentage points of the 52%. However, that has likely changed since 1999 if the trends identified in Figure 5 have continued.

As the number of new Ph.D. graduates in agricultural economics declines, the number of new SAEA members is also likely to decline. The average number of Ph.D. students per U.S. department has been trending downward nationally and by region, except for universities in the northeast (Figure 7). The U.S. average declined from 26 in 1986 to 20 in 1999, for a percentage decline of 23.1%. The south declined from 29 enrolled Ph.D. students to 20, for a 45% decline. This number has undoubtedly fallen further.

The decrease in the number of SAEA members is closely related to the decrease in resources to hire new faculty, train new Ph.D. students, and pay for travel. For example, in Florida, although the state's total revenue and allocations of revenue to universities trended upward in real terms from 1989 through 2002, the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) expenditures for research and extension (not including teaching) trended downward 20% (Figure 8). This ultimately affects the size of a department, the hiring of new faculty, and the allocation of travel money for professional meetings. My guess is that many departments of

agricultural economics are being affected by limited budgets.

Finally, the Internet may be a contributing factor in declining SAEA membership. Email communications reduce the need for face-to-face contacts and networking at the annual meetings. The Internet can be used to search for agricultural economics literature, which reduces the need for individuals to receive the *JAAE*.

Suggestions for Increasing SAEA Membership

Given these rather alarming trends, are there solutions to be taken, or are we the victims of trends beyond our control? I think there are some things to be done, which I will highlight here.

Potential Short-Term Solutions

Do nothing and see what happens. I am not inclined to do this, because that was not why you elected me president. Being president is not an honorary position just to make certain that there is an annual meeting and that the *JAAE* gets published. You have entrusted the future of the SAEA to the SAEA Executive Board, and action is required.

Putnam indicated a change in the U.S. culture whereby there has been a decline in the frequency of joining groups. Unnevehr and Mittelhammer found that the AAEA is capturing a smaller percentage of young professionals, non-Ph.D. graduates, nonuniversity professionals, and international professionals. To increase our membership, we must use marketing tools that make membership more attractive. We need to change some of our meeting content and products. We also need to make it easier for graduate students to become members by encouraging department chairs to fund the \$10 student membership fee. In addition, we must aggressively market the benefits of SAEA membership to students immediately on graduation if they are not already members.

Siegfried (2002) indicated the importance of annual meetings to the membership. There-

fore, the SAEA Executive Board will explore the possibility of increasing membership by improving the annual meetings. Segarra stated that meetings could be improved by developing better teaching and extension activities, increasing participation by students and nonuniversity members, creating multidisciplinary programs, exploring nontraditional areas, and changing the location and time of meetings. Other ideas also need to be explored.

Potential Intermediate-Term Solutions

There are potential intermediate-term solutions that need your consideration and concurrence before the SAEA Executive Board takes action. These actions possibly could change who we are and how we can expand geographically. In 2002, 30.2% of our members were from states outside the 16 southern states and the Washington, D.C., area (Paxton and Vandever, Table 4). Of course, along the way, we would lose some of our identity associated with the traditional land grant university regions.

Segarra, as well as Unnevehr and Mittelhammer, found that nontraditional areas (e.g., agribusiness, environmental economics, natural resource economics, international trade, and development) are being integrated into agricultural economics. We could incorporate other national/regional associations—such as other economics/agricultural economics associations, agribusiness associations, environmental economics associations, resource economics associations, international trade associations, development associations, and rural sociology associations—into our organization. This would move us toward a multidisciplinary focus.

Potential Long-Term Solutions

Long-term solutions that are beyond the SAEA's control include the U.S. culture once again embracing associations, better salaries, and more faculty attending and presenting papers at the annual meetings. Only 32.7% of the SAEA members attended the 2003 meet-

ings in Mobile. Therefore, we need to find meeting locations that would be popular.

If all else fails, we could become a "journal society" without annual meetings. Two-thirds of the submissions to the *JAAE* are from nonmembers. It is hard to see how this would increase membership, however, unless we require all authors to be members and perhaps increase the number of articles published annually.

Recommended Actions

I propose and plan to take action to do what I can over the next year to get us moving toward increasing membership.

Short Term

First, John Penson, the current *JAAE* editor, recommended and, you concurred, that at least one of the authors of a manuscript submitted to the *JAAE* for review must be a member of the SAEA. This will take effect with the change in *JAAE* editorship on July 1, 2004, and will influence the 2004 membership. The *JAAE* is a popular outlet for academic publishing—two-thirds of the submissions to the *JAAE* are from non-SAEA members. This is a testament to the high quality and academic acceptance of our journal. Why should not all authors be members, rather than depending on the members who financially support the SAEA's ability to publish the *JAAE*? Second, I will ask the SAEA Secretary/Treasurer to identify marketing efforts that would be beneficial in increasing membership and implement those in an effort to increase the 2004 membership. Third, I will survey members to determine your feelings and insights about how to increase SAEA membership. Fourth, I will appoint task forces, each of which will be responsible for one of four areas—extension, research, teaching, and nontraditional. I am omitting some areas (e.g., nonuniversity members, members in nonsouthern states, etc.), because the survey and four task forces need to be completed in time for the SAEA Executive Committee meeting scheduled for June 7–8,

2004. The Executive Committee will evaluate the information collected and will make changes that are consistent with the SAEA Constitution and Bylaws. Other changes will need to be discussed at the next annual business meeting to be held in Little Rock, Arkansas. I look forward to serving as your president for the next year.

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