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My Career Path and Guiding Principles

Gerald A. Doeksen

I want to thank SAEA for honoring me with the SAEA Lifetime Achievement Award. When I look at the past honorees and their impressive contributions, I am honored to be among them. The preparation of these remarks has been most difficult for me, because it is extremely difficult for me to talk about my career without being boring. My assignment was simply to talk about highlights of my career and offer comments on what opportunities and challenges I foresee for the profession.

By way of introduction, I have been working in the area of rural development for my entire career. My emphasis has been in helping rural community leaders provide quality community services. My career has been primarily an appointment consisting of 75% extension and 25% research. For about a dozen years, I also taught a rural development course.

My Career Path

In my case, luck probably impacted my career more than anything. I selected South Dakota State University for my B.S. program because it was close to my home in northwest Iowa. After earning my B.S. degree, I headed south to Oklahoma State University (OSU) because they were the first to offer me an assistantship and aggressively recruited me. After I completed my M.S. degree, OSU again aggressively encouraged me to get my Ph.D. The instruction, the advisement, the guidance, and the encouragement I got from OSU professors Little, Schreiner, Tweeten, Blakely, and Plaxico were invaluable.

I had an interest in rural development and

regional economics from the day I started my M.S. degree. Thus, my M.S. and Ph.D. thesis and course work emphasized this specialty area. When I look back at my career, I can easily say that it was driven not by me, but by community leaders with crisis problems occurring in rural Oklahoma and in the United States. To illustrate this, I will discuss three major problems that definitely influenced my extension and research activities. There were many others, but these three were the major crises that determined my career direction.

My first Extension meeting was in 1972. I had just completed my Ph.D. and the County Extension Agent of Alfalfa County, OK, called and said that the community had a crisis because the funeral home was getting out of the ambulance business. Being a naive State Extension Specialist, I said I would travel to the county and discuss the problem with a small group of community leaders. The word got out in the community that there was going to be a meeting to discuss how to solve the ambulance problem. The whole town showed up for the meeting, which was moved to the court chambers because it was the largest room in the courthouse. A meeting that I had planned with 10–15 community leaders ended up being a meeting with 200 concerned citizens. I listened for most of the evening and it became clear that what they really needed were budgets for alternative public ambulance services (i.e., costs for a fire-department-based system, a hospital-based system and a stand-alone system). I immediately developed budgets for alternative ambulance or emergency medical service (EMS) systems, and wrote a guidebook and other extension publications. As word got out about the budgets and the assistance Extension could provide, I ended up

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with more requests and eventually worked with every EMS system in Oklahoma. We still get calls relative to EMS and have updated the original guidebook five times.

The second crisis that guided my career direction occurred when the government stopped open burning at landfills and then adopted Subtitle D requirements for solid waste landfills. The federal legislation forced many environmental requirements on landfills, and economies of scale were such that many landfills were forced to close. Again, I developed budgets for solid waste landfills, transfer stations, collection systems, compost facilities, and recycling centers to help address the problem. During this crisis, the number of landfills decreased from 160 to 40, and Extension was involved with many of the landfill closures and subsequent openings of transfer stations and recycling centers. To aid in the process, a guidebook and other extension products were written that contained budgets that could be used to analyze the problem. This guidebook has also been updated several times to allow Extension to continue to address solid waste problems.

The latest major crisis that influenced my career was the problem facing rural hospitals about 10 years ago. Rural hospitals had problems of low volume, high numbers of Medicare and Medicaid patients, changes to more outpatient services, and high numbers of uninsured. As a result, many rural hospitals were closing and losing money. I initiated a process to measure the economic impact of the health sector on the local economy. Additionally, I developed a community health engagement process that helped community leaders assess their health needs and assisted them in providing health services that were feasible for their medical service area. Again, budgets and other tools were developed. These efforts led to an extension program that has worked with most rural hospitals in Oklahoma. The tools developed gained attention from national leaders, and the establishment of the National Center for Rural Health Works was initiated in 1999. Since then, through my efforts, workshops have been completed in all 50 states (train-the-trainer concept) and 30 states have initiated

programs similar to the one developed in Oklahoma to help rural communities address and solve rural health problems.

The Future of Rural Development

I strongly feel that the future for new professionals in the rural development area is very bright. As land grant university leaders realize that the survival of many rural communities depends upon off-farm jobs as well as on having quality community services available for agricultural families, more positions will be created. In addition, many related agencies working in rural areas are looking and hiring rural development specialists. For young professionals, I would like to share the principles that guided my Extension/research career. I feel these are still very appropriate.

1. *Listen to your constituents and let them guide your program.* The point here is to keep it practical. The biggest need for my extension program over the years was community service budgets for alternative community service systems. It is simple—address real problems for real decision makers.
2. *Integrate your extension program into research and teaching.* Every one of my Extension crisis problems led to the use and development of economic tools that required research. Also, when teaching, students like addressing real problems in real communities. Real problems create a great learning experience.
3. *Concentrate on doing what economists do.* We are trained in many economic tools and can do these better than anyone (our comparative advantage). Examples of tools I used include budgets, economics of scale studies, optimum location, routing, and economic impact.
4. *Work with related agencies.* Professionals have expertise that Extension professionals do not have, and by involving them we present a complete program to our constituents. For example, the EMS division has professionals versed in EMS laws, training requirements, vehicle requirements, etc.

These professionals can help with training, funding, etc., and are extremely useful at the local level. These professionals can also aid in obtaining grant funds for Extension programs.

5. *Aggressively seek grant funds.* Throughout my career I have sought grant funds to support Extension Associates. The reason for this is that the land grant system, with its limited resources, probably will not have funds for these very important positions, and with grant funds, you can greatly expand your Extension services. Throughout my career, I have supported three to five Extension Associates. These are professionals, generally with a M.S. degree, who develop and deliver Extension programs. Many of these grants came from the related agencies with whom I have worked over the years. For example, the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality has funded an Extension Associate to work on solid waste issues for over 20 years.
6. *Have a rapid response capability.* Many times, community leaders wait until a crisis occurs before they address a problem. As a professional, I had to triage requests and respond to real crises in a very short period of time. However, it is important that you do not overcommit your capacity to deliver products.
7. *Publish, publish, publish.* My work led to research projects that were readily publishable. We are still in an era in which we need publications for promotion. I found that there are plenty of publication outlets for good applied research and extension material.
8. *Get involved with professional associations.* There is much to be learned by participating in professional associations. The annual meetings also allow for presentation and often publication opportunities, which are needed for promotion. In addition to agricultural associations, don't forget the opportunities of other related associations. I, for example, am heavily involved in rural health, rural solid waste, and other state and national associations.

