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Lifetime Achievement Award—Comments

Abner Womack

I am deeply grateful for this most prestigious award and wish to thank members of the faculty and staff in both agricultural economics and the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute here at the University of Missouri for the nomination. Also, I wish to thank the selection committee members with the association for selecting me for this award. This year's recipients are all outstanding researchers in our profession and I'm deeply honored to be among these distinguished colleagues.

We have been given the opportunity to write a few words of advice—some things we have learned that may be useful or helpful to the next generation.

Most important, enjoy your work. The struggle to succeed carries the opportunity to expand your horizon beyond your wildest imagination and meet great people along the way.

Never underestimate your own research potential, and be sure to take advantage of complementary opportunities that broaden your experiences.

Comments to Consider

My list includes the following, which aren't necessarily profound, but reflect a few significant points associated with our team approach to policy analysis in the FAPRI consortium.

—As agricultural economists, we work primarily with decision makers involved in policy concerns and business/management strategies.

- My expectation is that the next generation of research will gravitate towards more localized and regional issues. Leading the pack will be coordinated research that blends concerns associated with agriculture, agribusiness, environment, and conservation. These issues are all encased in the notion of rural development.

—A team approach will likely evolve as the most successful strategy in dealing with these research topics.

- One of the most significant technological achievements for research in our profession is the microcomputer. Data can be processed and easily communicated; distance and location generally aren't constraints. This opens fertile ground for research opportunities across disciplines where simultaneous responses are expected but have yet to be carefully analyzed.

- As an example, the FAPRI consortium of universities includes Iowa State, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, University of Arkansas, Arizona State University, and the University of Missouri. About 60 research and support staff are involved with national and global models, regional models, and environmental models scattered among these universities. Constant communication is possible electronically.

—Find a research topic that is compatible with your interests and training that also has the potential for sustained funding in the public or private sector, or both.

- Leverage is a key word in this case. Research evolves slowly; therefore, it is essential that previous research blend and complement current research. Be sure that future

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research capitalizes on this foundation. These are slow, careful steps that eventually lead to a level of momentum that attracts necessary attention and requests for additional research.

—Set a very high research standard and be prepared to continually deliver at that level.

- Our discipline contains standards that are met via peer reviews. This is the case for journal articles, theses, and dissertations. Equal precision is necessary when direct requests or responses are generated for end users in the business and policy world.
- Mistakes are likely in any research project. Safeguards must be introduced to ensure that quantified results meet the highest standards of excellence and can be trusted.
- This form of review/strategy takes place in the FAPRI consortium via the annual development of a baseline with projections for 10 years in the future.
- Both internal and external review strategies generally result in a first and then a second pass at the complete process before information is released to the public and Congress.

—Maintain a positive attitude.

- Establishing a significant research thrust presents a fairly complex set of simultaneous challenges along the way. Advice is always necessary and appreciated. However, it is the nature of the academic environment that plenty of advice will fall into two camps: “can’t be done” and “can be done.”
- Our success in FAPRI has been that leaders across the consortium tackle problems with a can-do attitude. This implies that when problems arise from almost any direction, members of the team cautiously examine strategies and options that have the highest expected value in achieving our objectives.

—Consider the advantage of maintaining an operational research system.

- In FAPRI, we produce in-depth analyses of the likely consequences of policy options,

but do not make recommendations regarding a particular choice. In the real world of business and political decisions, one set of estimated consequences leads to another set of questions. In this environment, the payoff is to be in a position to respond quickly to questions that are follow-up in nature.

- This is another reason for generating the baseline in this FAPRI consortium. It becomes a base of reference from which many different alternatives, strategies, and policies can be evaluated. For this reason, models and data are maintained for quick response to ensure that timelines for analysis are met before key decisions are made in Congress or business.

—Take responsibility for finding and maintaining your research funding base.

- This is often the toughest nut to crack for our younger faculty and researchers. It’s very much akin to burning the candle at both ends. You must be visible before the funding is likely to arrive.
- Take advantage of resources provided by the university, especially for graduate students. Team efforts very often result in joint projects with sufficient funding to attract students and keep them after completion of their degrees. This provides an opportunity for both you and your students to publish journal articles and the leverage to consider the next stages of desired research.
- Set goals that focus strategies for self-sustaining funding. Choose an inner circle of advisors that you can rely on for continuous advice on both research direction and funding opportunities. Continuously seek this advice. It has been my experience that solo thinking is significantly enhanced by fertile, constructive comments from peers that you respect and know have your best interests in mind.

—Maintain visibility.

- Actively seek opportunities to communicate your ideas and research. Be visible at national meetings, participate in outreach programs, and actively seek media coverage for research that focuses on public areas of interest.