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Leadership Development in Agricultural Economics: Challenges for Academic Units

Michael A. Boland

Crafting and executing strategy are key tasks to be carried out by a manager of an enterprise. Unit leaders are managers of an academic enterprise called a department. The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of information collected from interviews with unit leaders of departments of agricultural economics and discuss challenges being faced by these unit leaders in March 2009.

Key words: academic units, agricultural economics, leadership, Western Agricultural Economics Association

Introduction

Crafting and executing strategy are key tasks to be carried out by a manager of an enterprise. Unit leaders are managers of an academic enterprise called a department (or in some cases, a school).¹ My objective is to provide an overview of information collected from interviews with unit leaders of departments of agricultural economics and discuss challenges currently being faced by these unit leaders.

At first glance, the topic of leadership has not explicitly appeared as a subject matter since Bruce Beattie's 1983 WAEA annual meeting paper. For example, previous writers have discussed the decline in resources available for faculty salaries and benefits, graduate student assistantships and tuition waivers, and operating dollars (e.g., page charges, travel budgets for professional development, supplies, etc.) caused by a decline in real dollars of Hatch Act and Smith-Lever funds (Martin, 2001; Myers, 2003; Lee, 2005; Amosson, 2006; Goodwin, 2007). These are issues related to unit leader responsibilities, but the relationship between the dean and unit leader was not explicitly addressed in these papers.

Theoretical Framework

Johnson (1991b, p. 10) writes that "department unit leaders have formal responsibilities for acquiring and allocating resources, supporting faculty with outside groups, and challenging and evaluating faculty." Furthermore, he notes, "... individuals (e.g., unit leaders can achieve

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¹ It should be noted that unit leader includes heads, chairs, or directors, and my use of agricultural economics includes departments in 1862 land grant universities that were at one time known as departments of agricultural economics. Many have since changed their name to include words such as "applied economics," "resource economics," etc. I have used "agricultural economics" because the Western Agricultural Economics Association continues to apply that designation.

great success but a certain amount of time must be committed to one's colleagues and the institution." In a related work, Johnson (1991a) states, "... the responsibility of an administrator is to provide a high level of products for their [federal and state government] tax dollar."

A traditional view of units is similar to an "Adam Smith" approach in that independent agents were hired as faculty who pursued individual goals which, in aggregate, resulted in the common good of the department, college, and university. Departments had critical mass whereby some faculty could pursue goals of the dean or provost ("applied research and teaching") and some could pursue the goals of professional societies ("research scholars"). This works when the positions of unit leader and dean remain relatively unchanged over time and each has some appreciation for all dimensions of scholarship. However, as will be seen from the discussion below, this view may shift in the future due to lack of critical mass.

There are various theories used to describe the relationship between the manager and the organization. The most common theory is Jensen and Meckling's (1976) principal-agent model which describes how organizations provide incentives to employees for achieving the goals of the organization (Huffman and Just, 2000). For purposes of this paper, the principal is the dean (or provost) who hires an agent (i.e., the unit leader) to carry out the goals of the organization.² Difficulties in this relationship arise (i.e., agency problems) because the two parties' interests differ in some way.³ For example, deans have an interest in ensuring that the broad goals of the stakeholders of the college and university (e.g., grants, publications, research rankings, student numbers, etc.) are being met, while the unit leader's focus is in supporting the narrower goals of the faculty (and their professional societies) and stakeholders of the college.⁴

The optimal solution is to align the goals of the dean with the unit wherever possible, with the understanding that the dean may not fully grasp the uniqueness of scholarship in the unit's discipline. However, in the absence of any mechanism to ensure the alignment occurs, faculty are less likely to be concerned about the broader goals of the dean or provost. The university uses incentives such as salary and tenure in seeking to create such alignment, but increasingly, this may not be enough to serve as an effective mechanism. Obviously, agency problems are easily solved if a comprehensive contract can be written, but this is difficult in an academic setting because most of the outputs are created at the faculty level in a unit (Beattie, 1983). Furthermore, as Beattie and Watts (1987) argue, individual faculty (and their professional societies) are more likely to have greater promise in fulfilling the land grant mission goal.

Overview of Issues Facing Unit Leaders

To develop an understanding of the relationship between the dean and unit leader, phone interviews were conducted with 47 unit leaders of departments of agricultural economics during March 2009. These included 45 leaders in 1862 land grant universities and two in

² The organization discussed in this paper is a college of agriculture whose activities include an integration of research and teaching (both on-campus and off-campus to undergraduate, graduate, and adult audiences). Many colleges also have an international dimension in the mission of the college. The word "college" is used here to denote all the activities of a faculty member in such an integrated unit. However, the author is aware that not all colleges operate in such an integrated framework.

³ This agency problem also exists between faculty and unit leaders.

⁴ Cartwright (2007, p. 162) discusses this further by noting that "a dean is rather like a zoo-keeper whose responsibilities are for the care and feeding of his animals."

non-land grant universities with significant undergraduate programs in agricultural economics.⁵ These interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes, and unit leaders were provided with a series of talking points which included questions about leadership within the department, size of the department (e.g., number of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, etc.), budget issues, information on recent faculty searches, and some open-ended questions about future hires. In addition, unit leaders were asked why they chose to change the focus of their career and to identify the challenges of being a leader. The information was collected without attribution of individual comments.

In general, the unit leader referred to some sense of altruism (e.g., desire to make the unit better, desire to carry out the vision of the department, etc.) or desire for change (e.g., three unit leaders revealed they had been hired explicitly to improve the intellectual creativity of the unit) as reasons for becoming unit leader. Five unit leaders with less than five years experience had been hired external to the unit (i.e., an outside hire). Thirty-eight (26) unit leaders had five (three) years of experience or less (figure 1).

Leadership Development

The process of leadership training and mentoring varied significantly across unit leaders. Seven of the long-standing department unit leaders reported having attended the "Nebraska Program" (North Central Administrative Development Workshop held in Lincoln, Nebraska). Most unit leaders indicated there were university programs for new unit administrators. Four had participated or were participating in Lead21. Two others had participated in the Big 10 Academic Fellows Program. The general impression was that all of these programs were useful for individuals thinking about a career as a unit leader but not for sitting or newly hired unit leaders. It should be noted that the National Association of Agricultural Economics Administrators provides a forum for discussing current and future administrative issues with a biannual program in Washington, DC, and annual and regional meetings at the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association annual meeting.

Program Leaders in a Department

In general, program leaders included undergraduate, graduate, and extension program leaders. All but one department had an undergraduate program leader with less than nine years of experience. Virtually all unit leaders disclosed that the graduate program leader had far greater responsibilities relative to the undergraduate program leader. The average percentage allocated to a faculty member's time as program leader for the graduate program was 25% of their appointment, although this varied from 10% to 50%. The average percentage of time devoted to serving as the undergraduate program leader was 10%, with a range of 0% to 30%. Sixteen departments had merged the undergraduate program leader position with a committee chair position and essentially had no time allocated to such a program leader position except through the expected service of a committee chair. Many departments employed professional staff to assist in the advising and counseling process for undergraduate students. This, coupled with changes in technology, limited the commitment needed from faculty. Most unit

⁵ These universities were chosen because faculty from these institutions have historically participated in the activities of the Western Agricultural Economics Association (WAEA). The scope of the interviews increased as the interviews proceeded. But a more comprehensive discussion of this topic should include the other many land grant universities (i.e., 1890 and 1994) as well as other institutions working in agriculture whose faculty do not participate in the activities of the WAEA.

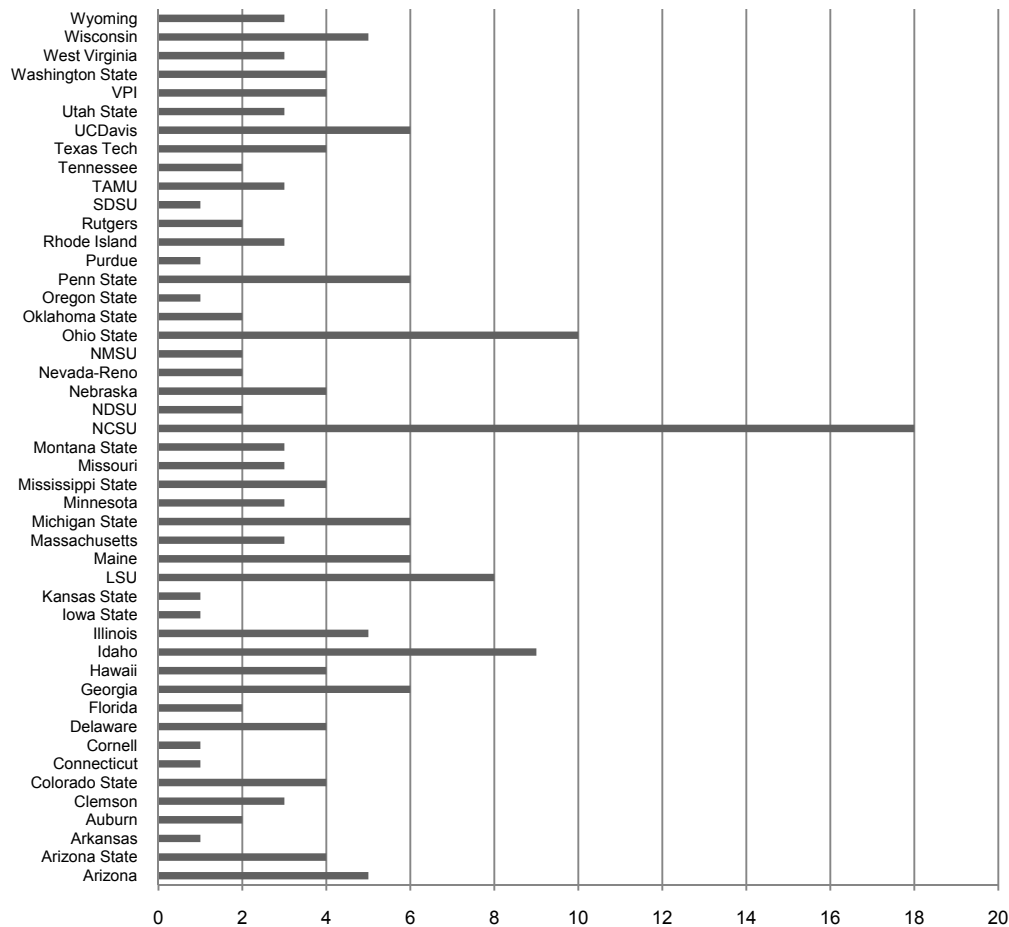


Figure 1. Years of experience for unit leaders, March 2009

leaders stated faculty were still involved in the advising process, but not to the extent they had been in previous years.

Graduate program leaders were elected by 17% of the departments and appointed by the remaining departments. Unit leaders were quick to point out that the elected person was approved by the unit leader and there were no “surprises.” Five departments elected undergraduate program leaders. Larger departments (in terms of graduate students, faculty, and staff) had an associate unit leader who also helped with various activities. Assisting with research coordination was the most often cited responsibility and, in particular, interacting with the graduate program leader on funding, grants and contracts, and reporting and assessment.

With regard to an extension program leader, the results were much different. Forty-two departments did not have a person in that position and their responsibilities were not as great compared to the graduate program leader. In addition, five departments had program leaders for other graduate programs (e.g., masters in agribusiness, rural sociology, etc.). One department had appointed a senior leader for development (i.e., donations) and recognition. Three departments had two undergraduate program leaders (i.e., one for each degree or major).

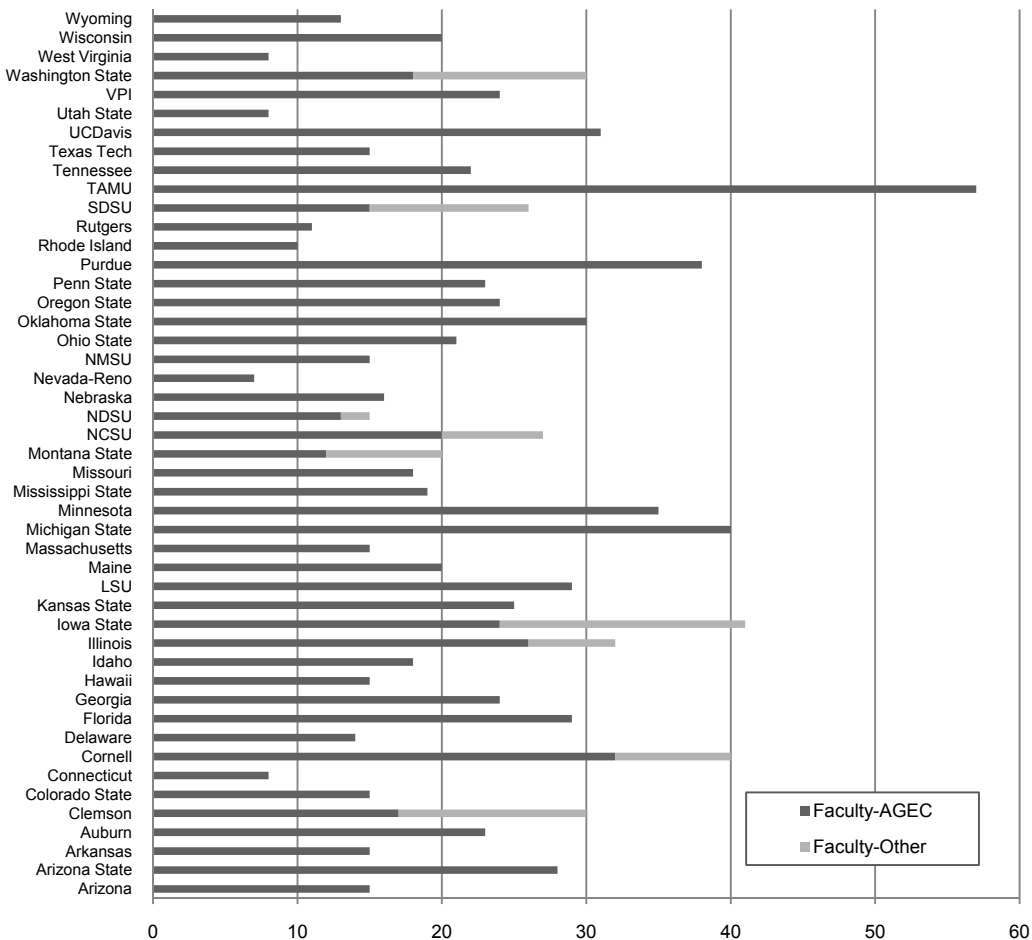


Figure 2. Number of agricultural economists and other economists (economics, statistics, consumer economics, etc.) by unit, March 2009

Virtually every unit leader discussed the need to rotate these positions every three to six years. All were annual appointments with the exception of three departments where elections and three-year terms were used. Among the reasons cited for these rotations were to spread the service load across the department, help maintain a faculty member's human capital, avoid burnout, build ownership among the faculty of these programs, and avoid "empire building." Many of those interviewed noted that the graduate program leader had more responsibilities and there was a much steeper learning curve which made it necessary to retain someone in that position for at least three years.

Size of the Department

The surveyed departments represented 975 agricultural economists in tenure-track positions (figure 2). Eleven of the departments had merged with another discipline (e.g., economics, statistics, extension administration, consumer economics, etc.) over time, and these numbered 103 individuals. There were 180 full-time equivalents in extension which included tenured

faculty and extension associates who had been in long-term permanent funding positions. The remainder had full-time equivalents in teaching and research.

Departments also reported 271 “other” unclassified positions which included non-tenure-track instructors (e.g., lecturers in agricultural law, accounting, etc.), post-doctoral researchers (e.g., visiting assistant professors, research associates, research scientists, etc.), and extension assistants with a graduate degree (e.g., farm management economists, etc.). The number of “other” had increased significantly in recent years as a move from the use of graduate students toward the use of post-doctorates to carry out specific research projects. Eleven departments share 10 Congressionally designated earmarks. Four of these are long-standing programs and two are set to soon expire.

Extension Programs

Of the 180 full-time equivalents, 18 extension faculty had full-time extension responsibilities without any other functions. With regard to the other extension faculty, the philosophy of split appointments varied by department. Approximately 30% of the departments had split appointments across faculty with research and undergraduate or graduate teaching appointments, while approximately 70% were split across undergraduate teaching and extension. This is not surprising given that extension is another form of teaching but with a different audience. There were 33 faculty with a three-way split appointment. These were in the area of agribusiness management or a similar topic such as business development. Most departments reported a small amount of fee-for-service income generated by programs where participants were charged a fee, with the majority of these essentially being paid for the meal or other program costs. All but two departments had fee-for-service income of less than \$100,000.

Undergraduate Programs

These 47 departments represented 11,186 undergraduate students. Figures 3 and 4 show the total number of students by department. It should be noted that these are not always comparable from department to department—for example, Florida has only juniors and seniors, while Michigan State students only declare majors during their junior year. Approximately 1,850 of the undergraduate students were in degree programs outside of agricultural economics (e.g., economics, sociology, management, etc.). Three departments provided classes for a two-year associate degree as well as the traditional four-year degree. Nine departments were merged with economics or statistics or consumer economics (six within the past five years), while two departments served as the home for the undergraduate business degree in their university. The leaders of these programs were all unanimous that these mergers had helped both departments.

Many departments taught service courses for the college of agriculture, resulting in significantly higher student credit hours that were not easy to track across departments. For example, an important learning outcome being desired by many land grant universities is the need for students to build an awareness of global issues and multicultural appreciation. Colleges of agriculture and, in particular, departments of agricultural economics, are in a unique position to help impart this knowledge to students. In many universities, colleges of agriculture lead the university in study abroad and study tours. Unit leaders could champion this service for the university, which would mean more service courses but perhaps increased opportunities to hire faculty. This academic focus generated significant student credit hours.

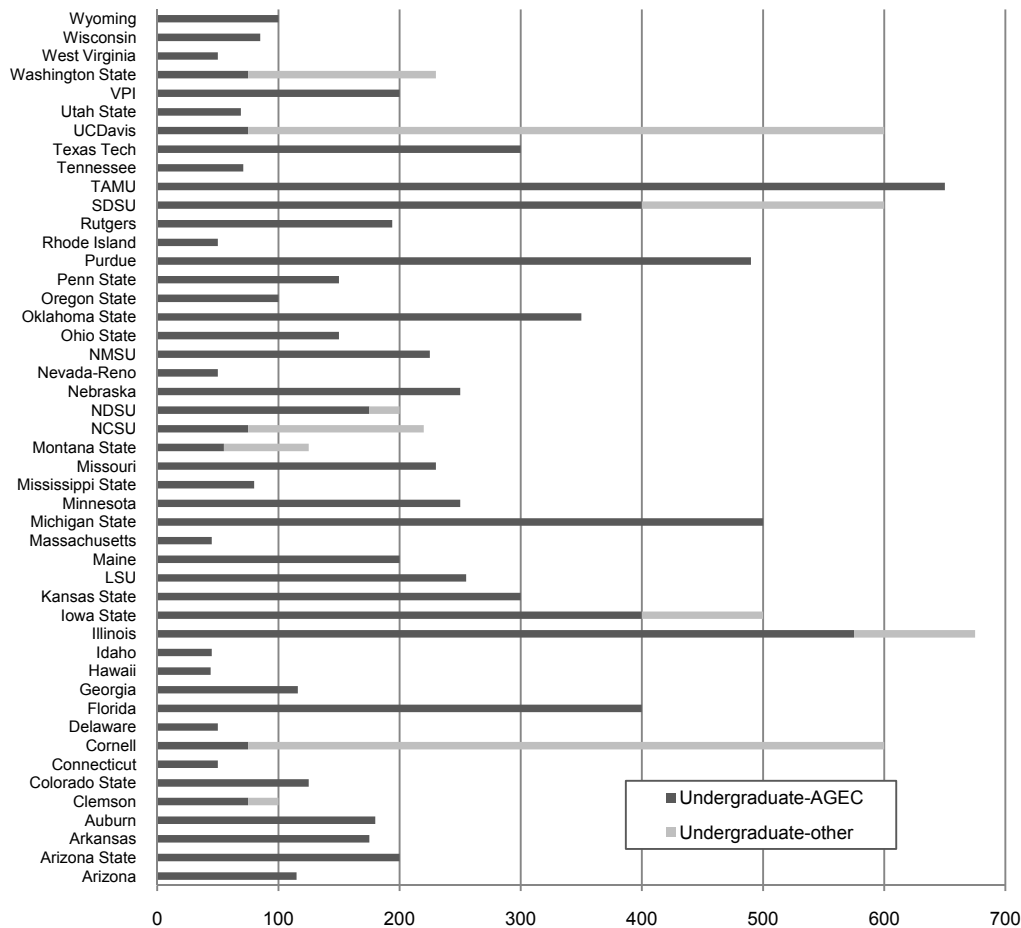


Figure 3. Number of undergraduates by department, March 2009

Graduate Programs

The 47 departments represented 1,119 doctoral students, 850 Master of Science (MS) students, and 236 Master of Business Administration or Master in Agribusiness (MBA or MAB) students. A number of unit leaders anticipated that many of the MS students would matriculate to their doctoral program. Funding for the graduate students varied by department, but 86% of the doctoral students and 46% of the MS students were on funding. Nine of the MBA or MAB students were on departmental funding. When aggregated, 61% of the MS or Ph.D. students were on departmental funding. Departments reported 166 hard (strictly Agricultural Experiment Station or other internal funds as distinguished from “soft,” which is defined as funded through grants or contracts) funded graduate research assistantships or fellowships and 162 funded graduate teaching assistantships.

Thirteen graduate programs were reported to share governance of their doctoral graduate program with another discipline (e.g., finance, statistics, economics, etc.). Seven of these shared programs had emerged in the last five years, and two other departments had such proposals under development. Four departments no longer offered a doctoral program in agricultural economics and these had been dropped within the past 10 years. Two of the four

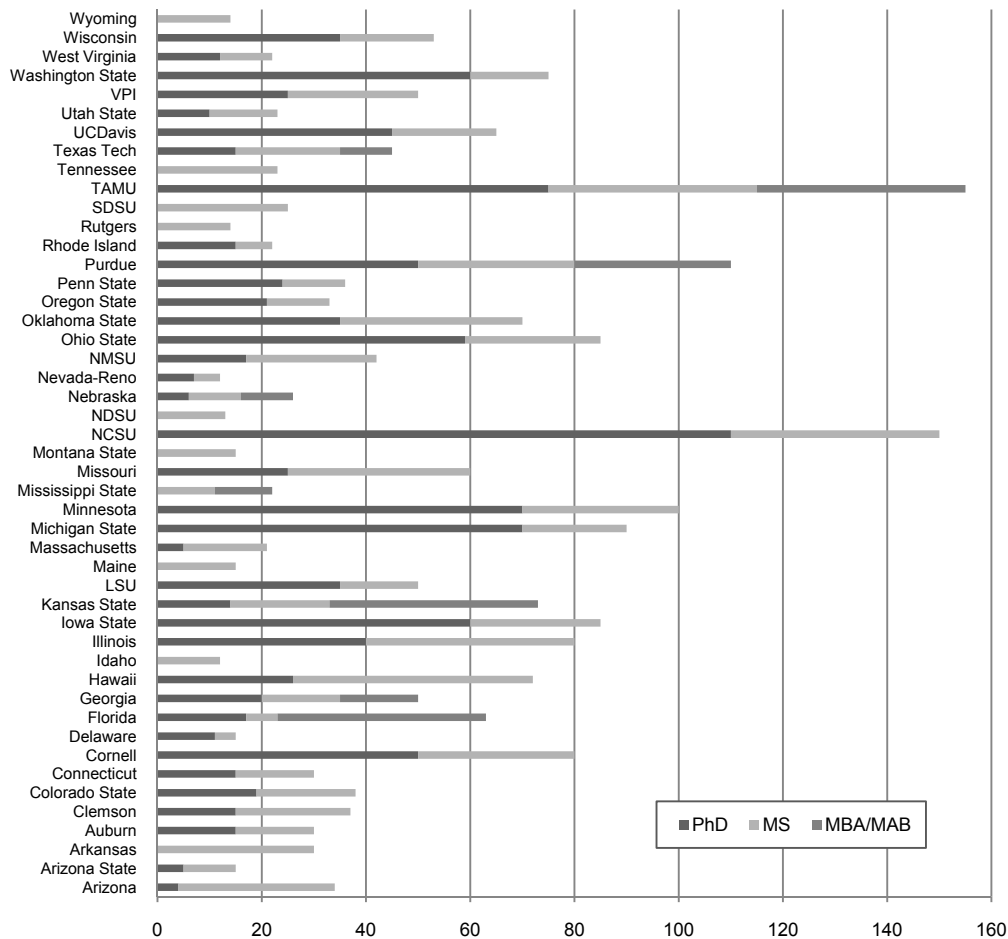
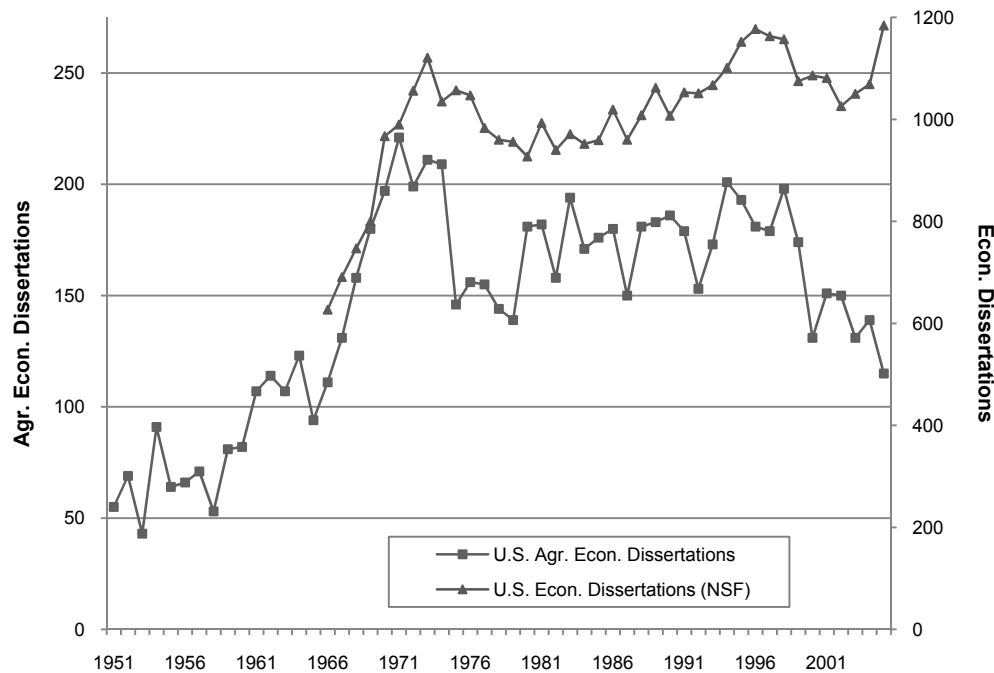


Figure 4. Number of graduate students by department, March 2009

had begun interdisciplinary doctorates (e.g., natural resources) and one was considering a doctoral program in an interdisciplinary agricultural field. Two departments that had never offered a doctorate had begun programs in the last two years (i.e., transportation economics and international development). One unit leader indicated his department would likely lose its doctorate program in the near future due to small numbers and lack of faculty desire to seek grants to fund graduate students.

Boland and Crespi (2009) collected data on the dissertations of 7,967 graduated doctoral students in agricultural economics from U.S. programs between 1951 and 2005 (figure 5). There has been a marked downturn in the number of Ph.D. graduates in the fields of agricultural and applied economics since 1997 numbers. Graduates in the mid-2000s were similar to those of the early 1960s, with about 125 doctorates per year compared to 175 to 200 or so per year for the 1968 to 2000 time period. Furthermore, while the number of Ph.D.s in economics awarded each year has rebounded recently with an influx of foreign graduates, Ph.D.s in agricultural economics have continued to decline (Boland and Crespi). Thus, the net supply of students trained explicitly in agricultural economics programs has dwindled over the past 10 years.



Source: Boland and Crespi (2009).

Figure 5. U.S. agricultural economics Ph.D. graduates vs. U.S. economics Ph.D. graduates over time (1951–2005)

Broad Issues Identified from the Interviews

A number of relevant issues surfaced from the interviews. These are addressed individually below.

The Likely Tenure of a Unit leader Is Going to Be Shorter

Although it was not asked explicitly, many of the unit leaders stated that one term (five years was most often the appointment) was probably enough for them. In addition, 12 of the unit leaders hired in the past three years indicated their department did not conduct a national search. Fourteen unit leaders noted that the interim unit leader prior to the current unit leader had been in that position for 12 months or more. All of this suggests the tenure of a future unit leader is going to be shorter as opposed to longer.

Clearly, departments are going to face difficulties meeting current needs for more experienced leaders. The obvious question is: How do colleges and departments create a culture for the development of leaders? When probed, many unit leaders pointed to the need to rotate internal program leadership positions every three to five years. The importance of having a culture where faculty are expected to contribute to the leadership functions within a department was expressed in one way or another by 11 unit leaders. Furthermore, it is going to be even more critical that faculty discuss and share a common vision for the department so that during periods of an interim unit leader (possibly creating long periods of inaction), the

department can continue to move in a common direction. One solution might be to develop the position and role of an associate unit leader who would transition into the unit leader position, thereby mitigating the inaction created by periods of interim unit leaders.

Alignment Mechanism with the Dean

Almost every unit leader discussed the need for the department to have some form of vision and the job of the leader was to move the department forward. Still, more than 75% of those surveyed indicated they did not have sufficient time to spend on this issue. In most cases, because the unit leader was relatively new, the unit leader's own vision had not yet influenced the department. Unit leaders discussed the need for a strong undergraduate and graduate program. Many unit leaders confirmed there was the expectation that the graduate program was vital to the health of the department because of its complementarities with research and faculty recruitment. Virtually every unit leader whose undergraduate program was not capped with regard to student numbers indicated there was an expectation of growing the undergraduate program as a means of growing the department.

However, the level of transparency from the dean for allocating teaching tenths was not well known by most unit leaders. This may be explained by the historical disparity in size of enrollments and service courses across departments in colleges of agriculture. Deans did articulate that when comparing across colleges, agricultural economics faculty, in general, were not as "productive" relative to colleges of engineering when measured against grants, teaching, and other similar criteria. Seven unit leaders (with some of the larger graduate enrollments) stressed some difficulty in communicating with deans about the critical importance of the graduate program relative to the undergraduate program.

One department has 11 faculty with joint appointments in other departments. The need for faculty with the ability to perform interdisciplinary work was identified by almost 60% of the unit leaders as an opportunity for growth. Agricultural scientists need the assistance of agricultural economists because many grants require the involvement of social scientists. Several unit leaders discussed other activities designed to build the undergraduate program in order to help support graduate student teaching assistantships. Similarly, leaders emphasized that faculty must recognize the graduate program is largely going to be funded in the future by grants or contracts, and departments should be proactive in identifying ways to provide for a graduate program.

Relationship with the Dean

In almost every case, the unit leaders discussed the relationship with their dean. Trying to balance the vision of the faculty versus the vision of the dean was a constant challenge. Thus, alignment of goals was critical. Johnson (2007) suggests agricultural economists often confound university administrators because, among other things, economists may discount the human factors involved in decision making, whereas administrators assert that these factors are important in many cases. One unit leader described how he was reinforcing the dean's vision at every faculty meeting and why it was necessary for the department to align itself as best it could to that vision. The necessity for constant reinforcement of the need for alignment and the reasons why it was imperative (i.e., the only way to gain new faculty positions) was expressed by many of the unit leaders.

Eleven unit leaders admitted confusion over what the dean's vision was for the organization. In particular, the prevailing budget crises in their respective states dominated the current decisions and made it harder to articulate to the faculty what the future was going to hold. These circumstances likely make it difficult for new unit leaders, who have never served within this type of environment, to maintain morale and stay focused on the future. This is going to lead to increased friction between faculty and administrators, especially if faculty have a lack of understanding of the vision for the organization. It is imperative, especially in the current budgetary climate, that deans communicate effectively what the future priorities will be for the college and how these will impact the department. Such alignment must be collective in nature for maximum participation.

Interestingly, many unit leaders discussed aspects of their job that were quite different from their earlier perception of the position when viewed as a faculty member. For example, interacting with stakeholders and working with potential donors were two tasks mentioned by many unit leaders as requiring more and more of their time. In addition, the ability to handle conflict among colleagues in order to solve problems and move the unit forward were identified as critical skills. The "HR" (human resources) factor was discussed by virtually every unit leader. For many it was the standard expectations of the position or the "daily grind," while for others this was a new experience dealing with colleagues who had "issues." Johnson (2007) found that many deans and university leaders regard agricultural economists as some of the most difficult to deal with in colleges of agriculture, particularly due to their lack of understanding of broader issues or their self-interest with respect to decision making. This view was reinforced by comments from the deans who participated in these interviews.

Budgetary Issues

Only three departments were able to access salary savings dollars from positions due to retirements, resignations, or sabbaticals. Longer-term unit leaders indicated this was a fairly new practice (i.e., not accessing salary savings) and appeared to be a permanent policy. The prevalence of those with little or no experience as unit leaders may have helped accelerate this change in policy because of the current financial crisis. Reversion of salary dollars to the dean allows deans to reallocate positions across the college to better serve the mission of the college.

Similarly, five unit leaders disclosed that as of this next fiscal year, there would be no funds available for journal page charges. This was expected to be a long-term policy. New hires would use their start-up funds to pay for those charges or the department would try to provide a mechanism to pay for them out of departmental general funds. Almost 40% of the unit leaders stated it was likely that a policy of not paying page charges from general departmental funds was imminent except for assistant professors.

A portion of the indirect costs from grants were often used by unit leaders to fund tuition waivers for graduate student teaching and research assistants. This funding strategy was especially important for international students who comprise over half the doctoral enrollments in all but two departments. In order to get an international student classified as an in-state student for tuition purposes, it was necessary to pay the tuition waiver from these indirect costs, particularly if the student's language skills were not sufficient for a teaching assistantship.

All 13 unit leaders who discussed this indirect cost issue indicated these funds were now increasingly being kept by the provost at the university level, and the percentage going back

to the college and department was smaller than in the past. This practice weakened their budget flexibility, especially in regard to the graduate program. A little over half (55%) of the departments reported having no such waivers except for graduate teaching assistantships. In general, tuition waivers differed by university.

Professional Societies Need to Find Ways to Maintain Their Relevance

Departments have helped subsidize professional societies through page charges, commitment of faculty to service roles in those organizations, and, in the case of seven departments, payment of membership fees to belong to professional societies. These commitments have promoted a diffusion of knowledge and ideas across the profession that most would agree has immense value. The creation of networks for collaborative research and extension has been fruitful and has helped maintain and enhance faculty members' human capital. However, this model likely may need some revisiting. The collective issue of page charges, membership fees, and travel is impacting departments in a major way in 2009. Faculty who are not accustomed to writing grants or financing their own program will be facing "major culture shock," as one unit leader asserted. We need to examine all of our professional societies to find ways to reduce costs.

The idea of what constitutes scholarship in agricultural economics was discussed by numerous unit leaders. In general, as one might expect, their view of scholarship was much broader than how the faculty viewed scholarship. Each unit has its own culture of what constitutes scholarship, but the professional societies could help articulate more broadly the role of extension, teaching, and research—especially in light of smaller numbers of faculty.

Departmental Rankings

The issue of departmental graduate program rankings was discussed. In general, the unit leaders were either enthusiastic about them or lukewarm about the need for rankings. Reasons cited for the rankings included the perception that international students (many with their own funding) applying to graduate programs look to rankings to guide their decision making, the need to recruit top-notch faculty, and the desire to have some objective measure of rankings for university administrators. Seven unit leaders were passionate about the need for the rankings, especially since they were necessary for their deans when comparing programs of excellence across the university and with other colleges.

Nine-Month Appointments

Thirteen departments reported having some or all faculty with nine-month appointments. Ten unit leaders stated there were expectations that faculty would generate 11 months of output. Two unit leaders conceded there was some difficulty in managing these appointments but in general, the unit leaders were unanimous in that highly productive faculty who were able to pay their summer salary also were supporting graduate students and other departmental activities. Management of nine-month appointments (with full-year expectations) was not considered a big issue. However, six unit leaders indicated that new hires were asking for such appointments and these requests were being handled on an individual basis.

Mentoring Issues

Five unit leaders expressed concern that they were not able to devote enough time to mentoring new faculty and helping to foster their success. This was especially true in units with many recent hires. Eight unit leaders shared stories of hires that were not successful and how they blamed themselves for not “doing more.” But as three indicated—and Beattie (1983) concurs—the costs of tenuring someone who is not a “good fit” or who is a mediocre performer can be long-reaching, likely engendering problems for the future of the unit. Many unit leaders revealed that their dean wanted clear signals from faculty regarding hires and tenure decisions. Sixteen assistant professors had exited departments involuntarily over the past nine years.

Supply and Demand for Agricultural Economists in Departments

In preparing for this address, I collected information on faculty in departments of agricultural economics using vitas and any information on departmental websites (e.g., date of degrees and universities where degrees were obtained, any information on international experiences, publications, etc.). A variable was constructed for purposes of estimating the age of the 921 faculty in the database.⁶ Faculty were assumed to have received their dissertation at the age of 27 years. This assumption likely understates the actual age, given that National Science Foundation data report an average age of 32 years for doctorates in economics. Nonetheless, applying that assumption to the database suggests there are 191 faculty (or 20.7%) aged 60 years or older in departments of agricultural economics, with 47 over the age of 65. By 2018, assuming no entry and exit, 50% of the faculty will be aged 60 or older. Six departments in the Great Plains have 30% or more of their faculty over the age of 60. The majority of these faculty listed research topics related to production economics, marketing, and agribusiness management. These topics are closely tied to commercial agriculture.

Unit leaders were probed on the quality of the talent pool for hires made in the last five years. In general, most reported the talent pool was sufficient. However, 14 unit leaders disclosed they were increasingly looking to the January ASSA meetings to interview due to the lack of suitable candidates at the summer AAEA meetings. Furthermore, virtually every unit leader indicated the presence of general economists in many of their talent pools. Twenty-one departments had hired a general economist in the past five years, and many reported mixed success. Nine unit leaders noted the need for more mentoring, especially early in the tenure process, to assure the individual was linking to research problems of interest to college stakeholders. The most frequent comment was that hiring general economists was “hit and miss.” One issue raised by two unit leaders was that salaries being requested by the general economists they were attempting to hire were greater than the amounts they were able to offer.

Future Demand for Agricultural Economists

Almost half of the unit leaders (47%) anticipated that new positions in the next five years would include extension appointments and undergraduate teaching. This was due to expected

⁶ It should be noted that this figure does not include the U.S. Department of Agriculture, other national and international agencies that employ agricultural economists with doctorates, or international universities.

retirements and the expected source of future funding. According to seven unit leaders, the most difficult position to hire was horticultural marketing. Virtually every unit leader confirmed that finding a doctoral student interested in working on problems related to commercial agriculture was difficult, and anticipated finding a suitable candidate for a future position with an extension appointment in commercial agriculture to be “problematic.” Applied international trade/international agribusiness policy issues and agribusiness with a focus on management was another subject area in which unit leaders reported experiencing difficulty finding suitable faculty.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Needs Program has been an important source of doctoral fellowships for U.S. citizens in agricultural economics (Boland and Thielen, 2004). One unmet subject category for the national needs is management. Farm management has never been an area of national need. A strong case can be made that there is going to be a need for doctoral fellows with knowledge of commercial agriculture including horticulture and specialty crops. If undergraduate teaching is also going to be increasingly important, this might suggest that doctoral fellowships incorporate participation in a graduate student teaching certificate program, which is currently available at more than 40 land grant universities (Boland, 2005). For example, the USDA Small and Beginning Farmers grant program has far greater appropriated funds than the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Markets and Trade program in 2009. One can foresee a shortage of agricultural economists having skills associated with farm management, including applied finance and applied production economics.

Agribusiness management and, in particular, business policy, is another unmet area of national need. The National Food and Agribusiness Management Education Commission (Boland and Akridge, 2006), which was funded by the USDA, found that business policy (e.g., international trade agreements, etc.) was absent in virtually all undergraduate programs in agribusiness. Increasingly, agribusiness management faculty are involved in many aspects of business policy (e.g., equity management programs in cooperatives, aspects of branding by geography, food safety and traceability issues in the supply chain, etc.). The International Agribusiness Task Force, which also has been funded by the USDA, is formulating recommendations for the enhancement of faculty expertise in this area. Many of these topics require knowledge of commercial agriculture, especially in crops and livestock that are exported or imported. Furthermore, research in this area requires the cooperation of agribusinesses, many of whom are stakeholders of colleges of agriculture. Agribusiness management with a global perspective continues to be a topic of national need in departments of agricultural economics.

Summary

The relationships between a unit leader and faculty, and a unit leader and a dean are very important. For the future, it is critical that the dean and faculty share a clear vision and collective goals. The level of experience of unit leaders in departments of agricultural economics is likely to be at its lowest ever, and this characterization is unlikely to change in the future. If this is the case, it is imperative that unit leaders build the leadership capability of the faculty in a department. Faculty responsibilities are anticipated to include more service responsibilities and leadership functions in a department. This transition has implications for hiring decisions, job responsibilities, and, more importantly, promotion and tenure. Because leadership traits are highly correlated with other traits such as altruism, it would be prudent for deans and unit leaders to take this into account in addition to other traits such as the “best

economist.” This also carries over into the leadership of the college. Organizationally, units will likely need to develop the “next” unit leader internally, as the traditional view of how leaders emerge within a unit probably will no longer work for most units.

The role of an associate head is one solution to this challenge. The cost of inaction is far too great to not have a plan in place for an interim leader position when the necessity arises. Each unit likely needs to develop a plan for allocating the appropriate responsibilities and functions between the unit leader and associate leader. One place to start is with the program leaders who have greater amounts of responsibility. Perhaps one of these positions could be merged into an associate head position, in combination with some additional responsibilities.

Other organizations deal with these issues in different ways. For example, federal and state governments provide opportunities for leadership development. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has opportunities and budget for leadership development. Similarly, businesses offer frequent education and training in leadership. Many corporations rotate managers every two to three years. Sometimes it takes a crisis to advance change in an organization, such as exploring sharing of governance of a graduate program, joint appointments of faculty with other departments, unifications with other departments, or reducing the number of small enrollment classes, especially at the graduate level—e.g., Beattie’s (1983) “vanity” classes. While not all of these options may fit each department’s mission, it is important for unit leaders to be aggressive in considering such opportunities. The dearth of experienced unit leaders means departments will need to be very proactive in discussing their future direction within their college and university, and actively seek opportunities to remain relevant. Development of leadership talent is not an arena where agricultural economists currently have a great deal of expertise or experience.

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