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## The Roles of Extension in Agricultural Economics Departments

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## The Roles of Extension in Agricultural Economics Departments

### Abstract

If agricultural economic departments in land grant universities are to remain useful and viable, they will have to place renewed emphasis on their Extension mission. Departments individually and the profession of agricultural economics collectively must embrace Extension work as a valued activity. Administrators and colleagues must more fully include excellence in Extension in the promotion, tenure, and salary adjustment processes.

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### Introduction

After spending 15 years as a faculty member in an economics department, I moved into university administration. Over the past decade, I have served as an associate dean, dean, and now vice president. Since joining the "dark side" of the university, my view of agricultural economists and agricultural economics departments has changed considerably. In particular, I have substantially revised my thinking about the importance of the Extension function and Extension programs in agricultural departments and for the agricultural economics larger profession.

In this commentary I argue that agricultural economists and their departments must focus more attention on their Extension mission and that, to do so, the profession must heighten the stature and enlarge the recognition for those who do Extension work well.

### My Former View

While a faculty member at Oregon State University (1977-1992), I came to accept that what seemed to be the conventional wisdom on the hierarchy of work in an agricultural economics department. That is, research (as reflected primarily in journal publications) carried the greatest prestige, followed by teaching at the graduate level, undergraduate teaching, and then Extension. Those with large research appointments tended to receive larger support allocations (assistantships, travel, etc.) and seemed to collectively assume a "quality control-gatekeeper" role with respect to hiring, promotion and tenure decisions, etc.

On more than one occasion, following an interview for a faculty position, I heard the comment "he/she may be able to do Extension but isn't strong enough for a research assignment." This assertion was usually based on someone's view that the candidate's seminar was not sufficiently loaded with confusing calculus or econometrics.

Casual observation suggests this hierarchy of prestige is imbedded in the values of the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). A review of the credentials of those who hold office or are granted "fellow" status supports the hypothesis that recognition flows to those whose C.V.'s are dominated by research contributions rather than Extension.

The biographical sketches that appear with the annual officer-director ballots emphasize published research even for those who have a split Extension appointment. One might well conclude that a mediocre research record is more likely to impress the AAEA membership than an outstanding Extension record.

Even if my assessment about Extension being undervalued in the agricultural economics profession is simply the result of a "Napoleon Complex" by proxy, my central contention remains. It is this: If agricultural economics departments are to be relevant, and in turn, reasonably well funded, in the future, they had better devote time, energy, and talent to building strong Extension programs.

## **My New View: The Case for Extension Applied Economics**

### **Current Academic Environment**

First, I offer a few "stylized facts" that describe the environment in which academic agricultural economics is now practiced.

One, funding for higher education has become increasingly politicized at both the federal and state levels. Programs are funded because voters/campaign contributors want them to be funded. And, because voters/campaign contributors want many other things funded as well, budgets for public higher education will remain tight for years to come.

Two, the cost of science-based programs in land grant universities is rising rapidly but at differential rates. As biology-based programs (agronomy, plant pathology, horticultural science, animal science, etc.) have adopted new techniques, the cost of supporting faculty in these departments or programs has risen astronomically in both absolute and relative terms. For example, faculty with big-time genetic capabilities not only draw handsome salaries, they also demand significant recurring support and large start-up packages. Meeting these demands threatens to "crowd out" other areas of activity, including social sciences such as agricultural economics.

Three, many departments in land grant universities have natural constituent bases. Hog and cattle producers obviously value animal science departments. Corn, soybean, and wheat growers tend to support agronomy departments. Golf course superintendents align with environmental horticultural departments and so on.

Agricultural economists don't typically have obvious or natural networks of supporters. Thus, their programs must create and continually reinforce their clientele base.

Four, "technology transfer" is regarded by decision makers and funders as a critical final step in the research process. For biology-based programs, technology transfer is often imbedded in research results. If an agronomist uses biotechnology in crop breeding, the release of the resulting variety effectively transfers the technology. For agricultural economics, technology transfer is not so simple.

### **Importance of Building Strong Extension Programs**

In this context, there are several reasons why building strong Extension programs should be a major priority for agricultural economics departments and the larger profession.

First, as suggested above, Extension education is the primary means by which agricultural economics research is "translated" and "transferred" for practical application. Much of the research conducted by agricultural economists, as reported in the journals, is steeped in mathematics and/or technical lingo. If research outcomes are to be useful, they need to be recast in terms intelligible to those beyond the academic wing of the profession.

I recently read an interesting article in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics (AJAE)* on "generic advertising," a very hot topic with Florida's citrus growers (Crespi & Murette, 2002). The findings offer useful insights for many commodity organizations that spend their members' money on "generic" advertising campaigns. But someone will have to interpret the findings for administrators and growers on the Florida Citrus Commission and similar organizations. Doing so will add significant value to Crespi and Murette's work. A strong Extension program can add to this value.

Second, the pace of change in the economic environment facing agricultural, food, and related industries is overwhelming. Environmental interventions, industry consolidations, freer trade agreements, changing input costs, and new technologies, among other developments, have created "teachable moments" for Extension education in agricultural economics. Simply explaining what's happening appears to be appreciated by those living through these confusing times. To use economics terminology, there is an increasing demand for Extension education that calls for a supply response by agricultural economists.

Third, as implied already, resource allocations at land grant universities are frequently influenced by constituent support. Solid, visible Extension programs can serve as a powerful means of engendering external pressure to drive decision making regarding investments in agricultural economics.

At the University of Florida, we've recently had an illustration of Extension connectedness resulting in new funding. Representatives of several of the state's agricultural organizations persuaded our Governor to allocate \$1.0 million from a federal appropriation to a trade center in our Food and Resource Economics Department. The external group made three things clear in delivering this

investment:

- a. They were willing to expend "political capital" because the professor leading the center had gained their respect and trust via his Extension activities;
- b. Along with excellent research programs, the center must have a strong Extension presence statewide, and
- c. They will be watching closely to ensure that they get (b).

The University of Minnesota's Applied Economics Department (AED) benefits in many ways from a unique Extension program. The department is home to the state economist, Dr. Tom Stinson. The state contracts with AED for Stinson's services. Stinson's work is widely reported in the popular press. This obviously brings broad recognition to the department. Moreover, Stinson has an important Extension audience of one--the Governor.

Fourth, agricultural economics can create an internal Extension clientele by providing expertise to those who make administrative and fiscal decisions. The analytical framework available from economics can be quite useful to administrators. Applications of cost benefit analyses and other approaches can serve to better frame choices and trade-offs.

In Florida, many believe that retaining a viable cattle industry is important for both economic and environmental reasons. If we are to enhance the profitability of cattle production in the state through research and education, we'll need to set priorities. Here's where agricultural economists can be helpful. Disaggregating costs of production and marketing for cattle will allow administrators to answer the question: Which components can be best reduced through research and education?

In this way, agricultural economists can contribute to effective and efficient resource allocations within their institutions. They can demonstrate the value of economics to their administration. Having deans and others find their work useful can influence internal budgeting.

### **A Few Recommendations**

What should be done to enhance Extension programs delivered by agricultural economists? Here are a few suggestions.

First, the larger profession, primarily via the AAEA, should work to heighten the stature of Extension work and of those who do it. Along with the standard annual awards, the AAEA bylaws should ensure strong Extension representation on the Board of Directors and among the officers. The criteria for achieving "fellow" status should explicitly identify a strong Extension record as equal to research and teaching.

Second, research agricultural economists should be encouraged to specifically identify the Extension activities that will follow from any proposed research project. Funding for an Extension component should be included in grant or contract submissions.

Third, agricultural economics departments should go out of their way to embrace their Extension responsibilities collectively. Rather than leaving Extension exclusively to those with Extension appointments, every department member should be committed to supporting Extension education.

Fourth, administrators at all levels in the university community should clearly articulate expectations for Extension program excellence in agricultural economics departments. The reward system, including promotion, tenure, and salary adjustments, should reflect these expectations.

And fifth, an appreciation for, and some education about, Extension should be included in the training of agricultural economics graduate students. Departments and colleges may wish to enlarge the number of Extension assistantships. They may also wish to require the preparation of an Extension presentation as part of the final sign off on theses and dissertations.

### **Summary**

Let me succinctly restate my case. Agricultural economic departments and the profession as a whole must find ways to build public awareness and support for the things they do. Agricultural economists must create constituencies. This is particularly important as funding becomes more constrained and the cost of research in other disciplines increases.

A serious commitment to responsive, research-based Extension programs is by far the best means for justifying investments in agricultural economics' programs and departments. It is clear from my perspective as an administrator that if agricultural economics departments fail to fully embrace their research-based Extension mission, they, and in turn, the larger profession, will not prosper.

### **References**

Crespi, J. M., & Murette, S. (2002, August). Genetic advertising and product differentiation. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 84(3) pp. 691-701.

 **Discussion**

Author: [John Rutledge](#)

And who says Administrators ( or economists, for that matter)can't be enlightened? Dr. Martin has seen the light and we'll be better for it. I hope those reading his article will share it with economics faculty and administrators who are unlikely to read the Journal of Extension because of the bias to which he alludes.

Date: 10/29/2002

Author: [George J. Young](#)

Amen.

Date: 10/29/2002

Author: [Laura Miller](#)

The choir applauds the sermon. It's ready to take to the streets, or in this case the halls of academia.

Date: 10/29/2002

Author: [Tom Darnell](#)

I believe the author is "right on". When most areas of agriculture are struggling for economic survival our land-grant universities should not abandon or downsize Extension economic programs. It is not enough to help our clintele produce more or tell them to add value to their products. We can only make so much cabbage into sauerkraut

Date: 10/30/2002

Author: Anonymous

Why do I not agree?! Yes, Ag Econ provides extremely valuable information but to say that they should get involved more with Extension to save their industry is like saying we need to build more bridges to keep bridge builders employed (even if we don't need more bridges). Why not instead focus on what ag economists have to offer society?

Date: 10/30/2002

Author: Anonymous

What do ag economists have to offer society but an approximation of the "perfect knowledge" the field is so deeply rooted in. That knowledge is valueless unless it is made available to decision makers. I believe Martin's point goes more to this point than the issue of saving the "ag economist profession". Ultimately the distinction of "ag economist" and "economist" is application. I believe his point is that it's useless to have an esoteric discussion among the profession on theory when the focus should be to make information relevant to decision makers in the ag industry.

Date: 11/05/2002

Author: [Dr.P.P.Pal,Scientist,ICAR,New Delhi](#)

I would like to hear from Dr.martin how his views are relevant in the context of developing country like India where mostly Agril.Economics Departments like to work in isolation and dissociate itself from any type of extension activities.

Date: 12/05/2002

Author: [Ken Hart](#)

Dr. Martin's comments are right on. His experience of perspective granted by administrative outlook results in a common sense conclusion, a welcome outcome among administrators.

Regarding Dr. Martin's comments on the AAEE, I have been a member since 1996 and am a founding member of the Extension Section (1999). While there are many great people involved and great things done, the culture of the organization is not especially welcoming to Extension. As a county-based Extension educator with a partial appointment in farm management, I often felt that organizationally and individually the AAEE was uncertain what to do with me, a "county agent," after all.

Date: 12/09/2002

Author: Anonymous

As an Ag Economist working in extension I find a great deal of my time is spent working with producers in financial trouble, interpreting agricultural policy for producers and developing new value added initiatives. I wish that I had taken additional classes in accounting and taxation, but I find the work interesting and challenging.

I have worked in academia and did enjoy the time I spent in that environment. The largest impediment in academia are the egos of some individuals as published research is equated to more prestige in the department and additional funding for even more research. I felt I was doing research for the sake of research not to actually have a reason for it.

Now that I am working in extension I have a number of research projects that I feel should be reviewed, but no time or resources to carry them out. If anyone in academia reads this posting, make an effort to contact the front line extension staff to highlight what research is being carried out for them and to obtain some insight into problems producers are facing today and discover some methods to assist them.

Date: 1/11/2002

Author: [John VanSickle](#)

I applaud Dr.Martin for an insightful discussion on extension in agricultural economics. His example of success at the University of Florida was a program I was asked to lead after a research orientation failed to result in funds to support the program. As soon as the agricultural industry felt a 'program' was being developed to assist them in marketing, production and policy, they welcomed our expertise and they found the funding

necessary to make this program a success. We now have a functioning International Agricultural Trade and Policy Center with significant funding. I believe a department that takes on the same mission of developing a 'program' that carries the research through to assistance in the field will result in the same level of support for other programs within our profession. Dr. Martin is right, without a results based extension 'program' in agricultural economics we cannot expect our leaders to recognize our true value.

Date: 2/21/2002

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