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**ISSUES IN UNDERGRADUATE
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS EDUCATION**

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**By
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ISSUES IN UNDERGRADUATE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS EDUCATION

By
Bernard L. Erven¹

The planning committee chose an issues approach to guide this morning's discussion. Strategic plans for addressing selected issues is the intended end-product. My role is to identify key issues the profession will face in the next three to five years. I have been asked to be provocative while addressing both current and emerging issues.

My list of issues is simply a point of departure; it needs your discussion, elaboration and clarification. The list reflects the influences of the institutional setting in which I work--I have not attempted to speak for the profession. The profession's "voice" will be heard in our reports from the small group discussions.

To help focus your discussion, I committed myself to a list of six major issues and ten minor ones. The panel discussion to follow will likely demote some of my major issues, promote some minor ones and chastise me for missing one or more "obvious" issues.

I start with the assumption that most departments that teach agricultural economics will continue to have undergraduate education as an important part of their mission. This mission will include the offering of an undergraduate curriculum for majors and service courses for other students. Furthermore, I have excluded internationalizing the curriculum, classroom management, teaching methods, and a host of possible sub-topics under these

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general headings as issues for further discussion. These issues have been discussed at other times during the workshop.

To facilitate your note taking and capture of first impressions and reactions, I have distributed a topical outline of my presentation. Hopefully, by the time we break for the small group discussions, you will have filled these pages with your reactions, observations, insights and questions. Keep in mind that my assignment is to stimulate your thinking about major issues rather than argue for a preferred strategic plan.

MAJOR ISSUES

Issue 1 - Undergraduate paradigms

The opening session of this workshop dealt with paradigms. Larry Connor and Jon Brandt developed a definition for paradigm that focused on the professional and intellectual arena of activity for a discipline. For our profession, the issue easily turns to labels: agricultural economics, applied economics, managerial economics, agribusiness economics or agribusiness management.

Whatever our paradigms, they need wide acceptance in the profession. We are addressing an issue at the heart of what the profession will embrace as its own, not simply what undergraduate teachers want or need. Additionally, all elements--Ph.D., masters, and research programs; extension education; department mission statements; role in the university community; faculty hiring; curricula; and the products by which the profession wants to be known--will be affected. The perceptions of the profession by employers and our alumni will also be affected.

Most in the profession see us in the middle ground between departments of economics and schools of business. The middle ground is viewed as having standards for scholarly activities at least equal to any other field in the social or behavioral sciences. However, the task becomes more complex when we attempt precise definition of the middle ground. Bruce Beattie has argued that our preferred middle ground should be agribusiness economics.² This approach suggests that many management courses needed by agricultural economics majors are taught by business schools and made available to non-business majors. However, strategic planning, financial management, human resource management and marketing management courses oriented to small businesses are rarely available in schools of business. To illustrate, human resource management courses in schools of business typically assume that the firm has a personnel department, relates to its employees in an impersonal manner, and treats personnel functions such as recruiting and training as responsibilities for specialists rather than generalists. These conditions do not hold for small firms including most commercial farms, county branches of regional agricultural cooperatives, and other family owned and operated agribusiness firms.

In summary, Issue 1 centers on these questions:

- a. Which paradigm(s) should guide undergraduate education in agricultural economics?
- b. What are the steps necessary for acceptance of these paradigms by the profession?

²Beattie, Bruce. "The Second of Two Stories: Agribusiness and Agricultural Economics." AAEA Newsletter, Volume 14, Number 3, May/June 1992.

Issue 2 - Faculty equipped for and interested in undergraduate teaching

Current Ph.D. programs are oriented to economic theory, sophisticated quantitative methods and disciplinary research. Assistant professors find the strengths and skills gained in these Ph.D. programs highly compatible with satisfying expectations for promotion and tenure.

However, the recipes for gaining promotion and tenure and for success in undergraduate teaching are quite different. Successful undergraduate teachers typically have: enthusiasm for teaching, patience with young adults, classroom management skills, real world examples to bring to the classroom, oral communication skills, and an applied research program oriented to state or regional problems. Rarely can an undergraduate teacher's failure be attributed to lack of technical knowledge and skill. Failure results most often because technical knowledge and skills are not applied to professionally oriented research.

The relationship between the content of Ph.D. programs and the content of the undergraduate agricultural economics curriculum is best described as a discordance rather than a continuum. Doctoral students specialize in production economics, then teach farm management; they specialize in quantitative approaches to decision making under risk, then teach partial budgeting and capital budgeting; they specialize in options, then teach "how to market your hogs." Few specialize in agribusiness management, then teach strategic planning.

We have relied heavily on our farm and rural backgrounds for an understanding of what undergraduates "need" in their agricultural economics courses. Extension specialists with their real world examples have taught many of our "practical" courses. Experience has often substituted for formal

training in the agribusiness courses we teach. Similarly, experience is often the only way faculty learn to design and deliver undergraduate instruction effectively.

In summary, Issue 2 centers on these questions:

- a. What knowledge, skills and abilities are needed by agricultural economics faculty to succeed in undergraduate education?
- b. How can the profession bridge the gap between qualities of faculty necessary for success in undergraduate education and qualities necessary for professional success?

Issue 3 - Demand for majors in agricultural economics

The number of majors in departments of agricultural economics is crucial to the profession's future. Demand for our graduates is the driving force behind number of majors. In contrast to elementary education, medicine or quarterbacking, our majors by and large did not grow up dreaming of one day being an agricultural economics major. They do not pursue a four year undergraduate dream ignoring the realities of their employment opportunities. Longer-run, university resource allocation is enrollment driven as we are painfully relearning in the 90s. Only the naive believe that decreasing undergraduate enrollments are a blessing or that the paradigm selected will not influence demand.

Most of our majors have alternatives for their baccalaureate education. Given the uncertainty about career paths, we cannot argue that majoring in agricultural economics is necessarily "better for you in the long run." We need to understand how students choose their majors. Does agriculture in our name help or hurt? What paradigm do potential majors perceive us as having? Is the problem lack of information, misinformation or damaging information?

Employers of our majors have alternative sources of people for entry level positions. Increasingly, we will compete with two-year technical schools, schools of business, departments of economics and other liberal arts majors, and majors in agricultural science mislabeled as agribusiness management majors. Finally, experienced people without degrees wanting to or being forced to change careers will also compete with our new graduates.

Following our own advice seems appropriate. As a profession, we are critical of producers who desire a world that demands what it "ought" to demand. We say they should instead produce what the market wants. Some principles of marketing management apply to our own need to affect the demand for our product (students). If employers do not want our graduates, we are out-of-business. We will not have the luxury of simply teaching what we want to teach

Over emphasis on agribusiness management and agribusiness economics can cause us to miss existing or potential demand for our majors. Natural resource and environmental economics, community resource development, international trade and development, and economic analysis are areas given little attention in undergraduate education. Again, decisions about our paradigms should not assume away other potential areas of demand for our graduates. Overcoming tradition, encouraging faculty flexibility, and reaching out to different types of employers are challenges that will have been met by the agricultural economics departments that survive.

Students preparing for Ph.D. programs in agricultural economics will make up a small proportion of our majors. Preparation for the Ph.D. in agricultural economics is best handled by modifying the typical undergraduate choice of courses or selecting a liberal arts major such as mathematics or

economics. The point is that feeding graduate education programs is not sufficient justification for an undergraduate program in agricultural economics.

In summary, Issue 3 centers on these questions:

- a. What will be the demand for agricultural economics majors?
- b. How can the profession, departments and individual faculty affect the demand for our graduates?

Issue 4 - Demand for agricultural economics courses by non-majors

Departments of agricultural economics have a history of teaching service courses to non-majors in colleges of agriculture. Students enrolling in these courses have often found them a reaffirmation that "science" is more fun than business, that "farming" is a better career than "farm management" or "production" is more fun than "marketing." From the faculty perspective, there have been the negative issues of minimum prerequisites, lower expectations for non-majors and lack of useful background experiences to be dealt with. On the other hand, discovery through service courses of previously unknown interests and opportunities has caused many students to change to an agricultural economics major.

Agricultural economics courses approved for satisfying university wide general education requirements is another source of demand for our courses. Many departments have not pursued the opportunity to teach such courses; however, three factors are affecting this situation. First, the trend in university-wide curriculum review is to state requirements in terms of general areas such as social sciences rather than a specific department such as economics. Second, faculty and students outside agriculture are recognizing

that agricultural economics faculty can teach highly attractive courses such as world food problems and international development. Finally, decreasing enrollments in agriculture are freeing up faculty resources for teaching outside agriculture. This issue requires getting beyond the mistaken notion that agricultural economists have a legitimate role in the university professorate only when they run out of their own students to teach.

In summary, Issue 4 centers on these questions:

- a. What will be the demand for agricultural economics service courses for agriculture and non-agriculture majors?
- b. Should departments of agricultural economics increase their service course load? If yes, how?

Issue 5 - Support resources for teaching

High quality undergraduate education requires more than faculty, students and courses. The recipe also includes support resources for teaching: textbooks, videos, computer software, libraries, travel budgets, comfortable classrooms equipped with modern electronic equipment, and faculty development programs. Textbooks, videos and computer software are of particular importance for the profession.

Textbooks and the accompanying resource materials available for large enrollment classes such as business management, marketing and accounting are high quality, innovative, colorful, well illustrated and up-to-date. However, agricultural economics texts for even our most popular courses pale by comparison. Much of our sad state of affairs with textbooks can be blamed on the size of the market, few rewards to faculty for investing their time in teaching aids, lack of interest by commercial publishers, and the economics of university presses. Similar scenarios hold for videos and computer software.

In summary, Issue 5 centers on these questions:

- a. What are the highest priority needs in support resources for teaching?
- b. What role, if any, can the profession play in the development of high quality textbooks, videos and computer software?

Issues 6 - Curriculum

The curriculum issue encompasses the other five major issues.

Nevertheless, it stands as a separate issue because of its centrality to the evolution of the profession and identification of what the profession believes most important to teach. Curriculum, therefore, will always be a major issue.

Curriculum content and process for curriculum decisions are the paramount curriculum sub-issues. The recent content debates have focused on the issues of broadening general education requirements, internationalization of the curriculum, writing across the curriculum, intellectual rigor, and over specialization. More specifically in agricultural economics, the key issues have included number and types of fields within agricultural economics, quantitative skills, single or dual tracks of course offerings for majors and non-majors, and name of the major.

It is too early to know the content issues for the next round of curriculum revisions. Possibilities include integration of agribusiness management and agricultural economics; the absence of agricultural production and science courses from the agricultural economics curriculum; experiential learning, including internships and co-op education; developing leadership skills; differentiating between a management orientation and a philosophy of entrepreneurship; integration of technical and community college education into undergraduate agricultural economics programs; baccalaureate programs for

second-career persons; small business versus large business management; accommodations for the transfer students from liberal arts and pre-business majors; non-credit background "experience" courses; and whether or not to include cutting edge data processing, electronic communication, and management information system courses.

Process for decision making takes into consideration planning parameters imposed on curriculum revision, availability of resources, faculty strengths and interests, and relative influence of various actors. Faculty are key in their role of "owning the curriculum." The process may emphasize, consider superficially or ignore the input of employers and students. Other outside interest groups, e.g., state legislators, may intervene in the process.

In summary, Issue 6 centers on these questions:

- a. What are the emerging issues that will dominate the curriculum debate over the next three to five years?
- b. What are the processes by which the key actors in curriculum decision making can be incorporated into the decision making process?

MINOR ISSUES

For any particular university or individual, the list of major issues may miss an issue known to warrant even more attention than any of the six listed. Therefore, a second list includes ten issues, some of which are likely major on a few campuses, but generally of less importance. Space does not allow a detailed discussion of each of the minor issues and the reasons for their being considered minor rather than major.

Some of the minor issues are of general concern in the academy but there is little the agricultural economics profession can do other than accept that

with which we are stuck, e.g., (1) student evaluation of teaching and (2) rewards for undergraduate teaching. In some cases, an issue has been around a long time and little has been accomplished by the already voluminous debate, e.g., (3) multi-disciplinary undergraduate programs and (4) integration of general education courses into the teaching of agricultural economics. Some items on the list simply need to be understood as a highly personal and integral part of a professor's responsibility to students, e.g., (5) course and career counseling and (6) extra-curricular activities as an adjunct to the classroom. Some are innovative and it is too early to know whether they will soon be added to the list of failed fads or made standard in the profession, e.g., (7) distance learning and (8) high tech methods for the classroom such as learning by experimental games. Finally, some of the minor issues simply mask focus on an underlying major issue, e.g., (9) student recruitment and (10) ties to schools of business and departments of agricultural economics.

SUMMARY

Debate in the absence of identified issues simply leads to a series of monologues. Our time together at this workshop is too valuable to waste by hearing ad nauseam about what "MyBackHome University" is doing. The planning committee has set development of strategic plans as the objective for this morning's session. Perhaps more space in the program would have allowed them to say that the objective is actually a meaningful start in the development of strategic plans to help the profession address a selected set of issues. Hopefully, the identification of six major issues in this paper and the not-so-subtle attempt to dismiss ten other issues as minor and secondary will contribute to our deliberations.