
**RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS:
PROGRESS, LIMITATIONS, COORDINATION, NEEDS AND PROSPECTS — A DISCUSSION***

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In retrospect, the past 25 years of research in agricultural economics have been great years for me. For all but a few months of this period, it has been my good fortune to work at North Carolina State University in a department that grew from a handful of eager young Ph.D.s to a large and diversified group with wide-ranging interests.

Those years have taken me to many interesting places. I have toured Texas across the Rio Grande and hydroponic cucumber beds in Puerto Rico. I have been introduced to such interesting problems as location of sweet potato processing plants and selection of appropriate milk pricing policies. Twenty-five years have brought warm friendships—from Virginia to Florida and Texas. Ahead is the prospect of other unusual places, more challenging problems and new interesting people.

In discussing the CSRS perspective on research in agricultural economics, Lloyd Halvorson has suggested that we talk mostly about the future. Sometimes this is more difficult than it sounds. Our local church recently engaged in an appraisal of its strength and weaknesses. Taped to the walls were long paper tablecloths on which the two lists were to be compiled. By the close of that meeting we had one tablecloth full of strengths and three tablecloths full of weaknesses! Surely we could do the same here today. "Past costs are no costs," though, as we remind our students.

Who are we? It is true that the name "agricultural economist" no longer seems to convey as much information as we might wish. We are becoming more nearly "low density-area people specialists." We will be using economic theory and quantitative methods to deal with tomorrow's

economic problems. Our optimizing processes will require understanding new technologies as well as a new generation of people in decision-making positions. We will focus our attention on alternative strategies for project formulation, program design, and policy development across a wide range of farm and nonfarm activities.

How can all this be done most effectively? Halvorson suggests the first step is to recognize our own administrative structure. In a new social sciences division of the agricultural experiment station, he proposes establishing three research groups (departments?) with roughly equal financial support. They would concentrate on (1) production and marketing economics, (2) natural resource economics, and (3) community economics. These represent slight modifications of his title substituting the noun "economics" for the noun "development." For me, development is more appropriately used as an adjective in the phrase "development strategies" and is, then, equally appropriate as a working component in each of the three research areas. Also, "community economics" implicitly recognizes potential inputs from other disciplines, such as sociology and politics, in community decision-making. Presumably, our sociologist friends would also be welcomed as fellow members of a fourth group in such a social sciences division of each station.

What would be the responsibilities of these three teams? Group one would concentrate on commercial agriculture, group two on the use, protection and enhancement of the environment, and group three on quality of life as influenced by the supply of non-market goods and services. Within each of these areas two types of decision-

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making bodies or clients might be identified. These two client types consist of (1) individuals, including firms and households, and (2) groups, consisting of combines of firms or households and communities. This two-way classification of research areas and clients form a matrix for use in problem identification, research program design, budgeting operation and for planning, implementation and evaluation (PIE).

Halvorson once more emphasizes the importance of relevant research. There are needs, limitations and possibilities unique to the Southern region. These should serve as the focus of the next quarter century of research by members of this association. This is not to say that our research should be narrowed. Rather, we should set in a broad national and international context issues and choices that are of special concern to the region, thus reflecting new forces that will mold the rural economy and shape opportunities for Southern people.

It bothers me that so often our students could as well be working on the bank of the Charles River, the shore of Lake Michigan, or in the Berkeley hills. Only a few days ago, a graduate student rushed into my office to report on the field trip he had taken just that afternoon. At a nearby farm he had been taught to recognize different soil types and to relate these to appropriate land uses. How few students let a region's soil sift through their fingers!

Renewed emphasis on commercial agriculture will bring a return to practical farm management and marketing firm studies, a greater interest in short-term price projections, and more penetrating public policy evaluations. New information sys-

tems can be of tremendous value, as we have come to realize again over the past few months.

Consideration of appropriate use of a region's natural resources has taken on special urgency, not only among traditional clients of land grant colleges but also among newly emerging citizen groups throughout the region. Mountain, piedmont and coast are words that have taken on fresh meaning for many people who, until recently, thought little and cared less about what their neighbors chose to do with the countryside. Clear water, fresh air, open space, and productive farmlands are no longer considered limitless or free. Serious questions call for serious study by those best equipped—by training and through having that unique sensitivity to their environment which so many of our students possess.

Some of you have experienced that excitement that comes to a researcher in community economics who has no more than bits and pieces to offer. In this fast-growth area of our discipline we have barely scratched the surface of research potential for influencing choices made by groups seeking improved rural housing, schooling, health services, water and sewer systems, transportation facilities, park and recreation centers, and on and on. But—we have made a start.

In summary, we find ourselves in a region and at a point in time where interest in our specialities could hardly be greater. It would be unfortunate indeed if these opportunities were missed because of the comfort of old ways, a reluctance to venture out on uncharted waters, or the constraints of administrative structures that are no longer adequate.