

CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS PROGRAMS AT 1890 INSTITUTIONS: DISCUSSION

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The original sixteen 1890 land grant institutions were charged with the goal of providing educational programs with a rural focus for black people (Williams). It was not, however, until the 1950s or later that formal undergraduate degrees in agricultural economics or agribusiness were offered. Three 1890 institutions initiated agricultural economics or agribusiness programs in the 1980s, with two 1890 universities still without formal undergraduate degree programs in the discipline by 1989.

Why was there a 50 to 60 year lag in developing degree programs in agricultural economics at the predominantly black universities? Certainly, the problems of economic development, human resource development, and adjustment to new agricultural technologies were major concerns of 1890 institutions from their inception. These issues are primarily social science related and within at least the partial purview of agricultural economics.

To be honest, there was also a 50 to 60 year time lag in the development of agricultural economics curricula at 1862 institutions in the South. The lag in response at both 1862 and 1890 land grant institutions in developing specialized curricula in agricultural economics was due to several factors, including the following: (1) agricultural economics did not emerge until the 1920s as a well-recognized discipline with a scholarly journal, a professional association, and graduate degree programs; (2) agricultural college administrators were dominated with faculty oriented and trained in production agriculture; and (3) undergraduate curricula tended to produce general "agriculturalists" until the 1950s, as opposed to specialized, discipline-oriented B.S. graduates.

The McDowell-Evans paper is useful and interesting from the point of view of tracing the historical development of the 1890 institutions and Tuskegee University. Considerable time lags occurred between the founding date and the initiation of four-

year degree programs, as well as time lags between establishment of four-year degree programs and initiation of graduate degree programs. While there are some exceptions, undergraduate agricultural economics or agribusiness curricula were initiated after graduate degree programs in nonagricultural economics areas had already been established at the 1890 institutions. By the 1988-1989 academic year, however, there were 500 undergraduate agricultural economics/agribusiness majors at twelve reporting 1890 institutions, or an average of 42 undergraduate students per program. Thus, despite time lags and underemphasis in earlier years, agricultural economics seems to have generated at least reasonable student interest at 1890 institutions.

CURRENT ISSUES

While the McDowell-Evans paper provides a good description of the historical development of agricultural economics programs at 1890 institutions, it provides only a cursory introduction to the contemporary problems or issues confronted by agricultural economics units at these institutions. A partial listing of issues would include the following:

- Enhancing the Research-Teaching Interface
- Subject Matter Focus for Research
- Role of Agribusiness in the Undergraduate Curriculum
- Faculty Retention/Faculty Salaries

Enhancing the Research-Teaching Interface

As noted by Dean Carroll V. Hess several years ago, "research findings constantly render the substance of instruction obsolete and replace it with fresh and more valid materials... Teaching can no longer concern itself only with what is known. How truth is discovered, what tools and methods are used to expound knowledge, and how adequate or inadequate the tools are—are all teaching concerns" (Hess).

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According to the McDowell-Evans survey, all agricultural economists at the 1890 institutions (except those at Langston University) have formal research appointments of at least 25%. At six 1890 universities, the average faculty member has at least 50% of his or her appointment in research. Given this state of events (which is a considerable increase in research support over what existed twenty or more years ago), the key question has to do with the nature and quality of the research output in agricultural economics from 1890 institutions. Has the overall level of scholarly productivity increased over time in line with the increase in research budgets, or have increased research allocations merely subsidized heavy teaching assignments?

The quality of research is much more difficult to measure when compared with the measurement of the total number of research publications. The *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* reported in 1986 a ranking of 1890 institutions in terms of the citations of the scholarly output of its faculty (Beilock, Polopolus, and Correal). The use of citations of authors to rank academic institutions places the emphasis upon the usefulness of literary output rather than sheer volume of a unit's output. Based upon total citations of 1890 authors over the 1980-1984 period, the top ranked institutions were as follows (in order): Tennessee State, Southern University, Delaware State, North Carolina A & T, and South Carolina State. Tennessee State's agricultural economics unit ranked in the top 50 institutions in the United States, with citation totals comparable to such 1862 institutions as New Mexico State, Louisiana State, Rutgers, Delaware, and Mississippi State. While ranked relatively high in basic research, it is interesting to note that Tennessee State University, however, ranks third lowest among 1890 institutions in enrollment of B.S. level majors in agricultural economics and agribusiness.

The bulk of the research conducted in agricultural economics at the 1890 institutions is applied in nature. Citation indexes are not necessarily the most appropriate methods for evaluating the "quality" or effectiveness of applied research completed at these 1890 universities. It has been argued elsewhere that applied research and extension programs in agricultural economics can best be evaluated by comparing the research effort in relation to research need, not by tabulating the *output* of publications from research (Polopolus and Beilock). Effort can be measured by the number of professional man years, while "need" can be defined in terms of the mission of the 1890 institutions. In effect, is the actual or real applied research agenda in consonance with the perceived needs and goals of 1890 institutions? If

the answer is no, then the research program is off target, irrespective of the number of publications and the number of times these publications have been cited by other scholars.

Subject Matter Focus for Research

The McDowell-Evans paper correctly points out that the subject matter focus of research at the 1890 institutions is predominantly involved with small farm or limited resource analysis. Two questions quickly come to mind. What is the nature of the small farm and/or limited resource analysis currently underway, and what are the other appropriate and priority researchable issues at these institutions in the immediate future?

While it is true that our predominantly black universities were almost exclusively teaching institutions until the late 1960s, the current and prospective expectation is that these institutions will come into the mainstream of major American universities with increased emphasis on research of contemporary issues relevant to the society served by each university.

Admittedly, a strong case can be made for continued research on the economic problems associated with small farms and farms limited with land, capital, and possibly even labor for harvest. This work is primarily focused upon farm management or microeconomic issues of the individual farm firm. It can, of course, also be broadened to look at the associated marketing and infrastructure problems of transportation, packing/processing facilities, credit, and distribution. Small farm analysis can also lead to interesting issues of human resource development of the individuals involved with small farming, as well as community development for the rural areas impacted with a high incidence of small farms. Several relatively new conceptual frameworks, such as Alternative Agriculture, LISA (low input sustainable agriculture), Organic Farming, and Farming Systems, provide paradigms for analysis, usually within a multidisciplinary format.

A research menu limited to the analysis of small farm issues, however intriguing, seems to be overly narrow and restrictive as 1890 universities look to the twenty-first century. It also seems overly restrictive to require or assume that the 1890 institutions will conduct applied research only on issues pertaining to the rural black population. Professor Davis argued as early as 1974 that 1890 institutions might have to broaden their research orientation beyond their historical association with black clientele if meaningful research cooperation with 1862 institutions is to be attained (Davis, 1974).

Overall, an appropriate research agenda for agricultural economists at the 1890 institutions should include the following: (1) small farm analysis, both the farm management and marketing components, as well as the appropriate aspects of Alternative Agriculture, LISA, Organic Farming, and Farming Systems; (2) small business analysis for rural societies and communities; and (3) human and/or community resource development.

All three of these research areas require close working relationships with scholars in the agricultural production sciences, business administration, and sociology, as appropriate to the specific research project. Agricultural economists must take the initiative and leadership in developing those interdisciplinary ties and relationships. Not only is it appropriate to develop working relationships and joint projects with other disciplines on 1890 campuses, but also it could become extremely beneficial for maximum social product if there were an increase in the number of joint research projects between 1890 and 1862 agricultural economists on an interregional and/or intrastate basis (Davis, 1973).

Role of Agribusiness in the Undergraduate Curriculum

Properly trained graduates with agribusiness degrees are heavily recruited on 1890 campuses. Entry level salaries for these B.S. graduates are known to exceed salaries of many M.S. and Ph.D. level agricultural economists (Davis, 1985). Yet the academic training of the agricultural economics faculty may not be synchronous with the subject matter needs of a strong agribusiness curriculum. This is frankly a serious problem at both 1890 and 1862 universities.

One way to deal with the problem is to reorient the research agenda to include nonfarm small business management and marketing issues, as noted above. Another method of handling the problem is to prescribe agribusiness management and/or marketing training at the time of initial faculty employment.

From the standpoint of professional respectability, individuals who take the agribusiness route are sometimes looked down upon by agricultural "economists." This is rubbish. There is room for highly respected professionals carrying the label of either agribusiness economist or agricultural economist. To give added professional stature to the specialty of agribusiness, the International Agribusiness Association will become legally chartered this year in the state of Arkansas, with the international business office located at Texas A & M University. In due course, the international journal *Agribusiness* will be transferred to the International Agribusiness As-

sociation for editing and control. The intent of this new professional association is to provide a professional "home" for agribusiness specialists at educational institutions across many disciplines, as well as to meet the research and education needs of private businessmen, large and small, involved with agribusiness on a daily basis.

Faculty Retention/Faculty Salaries

A chronic and serious problem associated with improving the condition of teaching and research at 1890 institutions has to do with disparities between faculty salaries at 1862 and 1890 institutions. The AAEA Report on "Opportunities and Status of Blacks in the Agricultural Economics Profession" concluded that "... being black and employed for a long time at an 1890 institution reduces earnings" (Allen *et al.*). This report further stated that the 1890 universities have not been able to maintain competitive salary levels as professionals receive promotions. As increased employment opportunities occur for black agricultural economists at 1862 universities, in government, and in private industry, the problem of recruiting and retaining well-trained agricultural economists becomes even more serious.

In addition to lower average faculty salaries at the 1890 institutions, these universities have suffered historically from a much lower level of Federal support for research and extension activities. Until the passage of the 1981 Food and Agriculture Act, 1890 institutions did not receive annual research appropriations as opposed to grants on a year-to-year basis. Although the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 permitted funding for extension services, the 1890 universities did not receive Federal extension funds until a modest allocation began in 1972 (Williams and Williamson). Meager and/or conditional Federal support for research and extension functions has severely limited the attractiveness of 1890 universities as employers of the best trained Ph.D. level agricultural economists.

How can 1890 institutions cope with this faculty salary/retention problem? While there is no quick fix on this tough issue, there are some tangible approaches to the problem. First, all faculty should be required regularly to seek contract and grant dollars to support their research agendas. University rules and regulations should become flexible enough to permit outside funds to augment faculty salaries, either for summer research or as an addendum to regular salary rates. Second, private consulting that relates closely to faculty research priorities should be encouraged. Third, special efforts and well-designed college or university development activities should be geared toward creating special

endowments for undergraduate and graduate scholarships, lectureships, research travel/support, and even endowed chairs (or special premiums paid to existing faculty positions).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The 1890 land grant universities are an important national resource. American society has benefited greatly from their contributions toward a better educated, better informed populace. In a world beset with many social and economic problems, there is a full plate of challenges in need of response from the limited number of agricultural economists at these 1890 institutions. Sufficient communication and coordination, however, must occur to avoid duplication of research efforts by faculty at both the 1862

and 1890 universities. With concentration upon such areas as small nonfarm business management, small farm analysis, and human and community resource development, it is unlikely that the 1890 universities will have much of a problem of duplication of effort with the 1862 universities.

As noted by T. T. Williams in 1973, the 1890 institutions have specialized knowledge and experience in dealing with limited resource owners and the rural poor. The goal should be to maximize the beneficial economic and social productivity and to minimize the problems of alienation, poverty, and crime in rural America. The faculty and students in the 1890 universities, particularly the social scientists, have a challenging and important role to play in dealing with these important issues.

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