

# ***Staff Paper***

## **Department Values in the Pursuit of Excellence**

**Larry J. Connor**  
**Chairperson**

**Staff Paper 86-40**

**May 1986**



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DEPARTMENT VALUES IN THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

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# **Department Values in the Pursuit of Excellence<sup>1</sup>**

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Any academic department should place a high value on excellence. Regardless of the area or nature of the department, the age of the faculty, availability of funds, or particular administrator, excellence should be the paramount pursuit of all faculty. It is necessary to distinguish between individual and departmental excellence. Both are important. However, departmental excellence is more than merely the aggregation of program excellence of individual faculty. There is a considerable difference between "a community of scholars" and a "collection of individual scholars."

The instrumental departmental values for achieving excellence are often poorly understood or articulated by department faculties and administrators. Where understood, there may still be disagreement as to appropriate prescriptions for using instrumental values to achieve excellence. The major purpose of this paper is to articulate the relationships among values and prescriptions (including operating rules) for the Department of Agricultural Economics at Michigan State University in its pursuit of excellence.

## **General Department Values**

There are general values that underlie the conduct and administration of department programs. These are pertinent regardless of the specific functional area of the department (research, teaching, extension, and international). These include:

1. Diversity and heterogeneity are valued more highly than cloning. As a general practice, the department has pursued intellectual diversity by staffing from various institutions around the U.S. Some 15 different academic institutions are represented in the terminal degrees of department faculty. Our diversity and heterogeneity have provided a richness in academic thought. It has also occasionally presented problems.

The following quote from Larry Boger at a 1961 faculty meeting is particularly relevant:

"...In a unit such as ours, many personalities, and interests, many backgrounds, and many viewpoints are melded together. It is natural that there are conflicts. It is not

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only natural to have them, but at times they should be encouraged. About the only level of conflict that deserves status and recognition is the intellectual level. Even with all our affluence there are two kinds of people that we simple cannot afford in the department. One is the person who uses non intellectual bases for deciding his stand on academic matters--the other is the intellectual fraud. Ideally, we should have the quality of faculty possessing the kind of mutual respect for one another which would preclude the possibility that anyone would ever question the intellectual integrity of another. Nothing can be more vicious than to not have it..."

It is only natural to have conflict in the department. However, it is important to follow the operating rules that faculty (a) should not air differences in public away from the department, and (b) should not deliberately run down a colleague.

2. All functional areas of the department (research, teaching, extension, international) are regarded of equal value in judging the performance of faculty for tenure, promotion and salary adjustments. As an operating rule, faculty performance is judged and aggregated on the basis of budgeted salary weights. This merely says that there are no second-class citizens in the department because of individual functional emphases. This is codified in department bylaws.
3. Great value is attached to latitude and freedom of faculty to develop and prioritize individual programs. Faculty are recruited with particular qualifications and for a job description designed in somewhat general terms. However, faculty are encouraged to develop their own activities within these general parameters. At times, this level of self direction has proven to be a psychic burden for some faculty. However, the latitude and freedom this department allows its faculty has expedited the rapid development of faculty capabilities and individual programs.
4. High value is placed on faculty participation in major policy matters of the department. Through various means such as department committees, faculty meetings and department retreats, the faculty is heard on major policy issues pertaining to the department programs. Various forms of faculty consultations with the Chair are specified in department bylaws.
5. Administrative decisiveness is held in high value in the department. Department operating procedures make the Chair, after whatever faculty counsel is appropriate, responsible for major decisions such as promotions, tenure, salary adjustments, hiring new faculty, budget allocations, etc.

6. Participation of young faculty in department affairs is highly valued. This has been taken seriously by both department faculty and the Chair. As evidence, one need only look at the composition of the Faculty Advisory Committee for the past several years. This is particularly crucial from the standpoint of the department in order to reflect new ideas and new thinking in department decision processes. It also facilitates young faculty understanding of the department.
7. Split faculty appointments are regarded as valuable. This value is based on the considerable complementarities among teaching, research and extension functions. At the present time only two faculty in the department have 100 percent appointments in a functional area. This system is different from some other agricultural economics departments, especially where extension is a separate entity.
8. Faculty participation in academic governance is valued on a selective basis. The agricultural economics faculty have taken seriously their college and university responsibilities. Department faculty have occupied most major academic governance positions at the college and university levels. As a consequence, the department has had considerable impact on the college and university. This participation has helped maintain a constructive image and presence for the department and college in the rest of the university. This is not to say that all academic governance activities are of equal importance. Indeed, some have relatively little departmental merit.
9. Considerable initiative by individual faculty in securing and managing contracts and grants is held in high value. All contracts and grants must be reviewed and approved by the chair, college, and university. However, once approved and received, individual faculty are given great latitude in carrying out the project and utilizing the monies. Failure to grant this latitude and authority to individual faculty would mean a sharp reduction in future funds generated by the department!
10. Administrative flexibility in managing the appropriated funds (University General, Experiment Station, and Extension Service) is highly valued. The department is apparently one of the few in the college that does not allocate individual budgets to faculty. Instead, the department achieves greater flexibility by centrally managing the department's "hard money accounts."
11. Considerable value is attached to individual faculty undertaking activities for the betterment of the department, even when such activities may have limited significance to one's professional career. This is an unusual quality of the Agricultural Economics faculty. Many examples can be cited where individual faculty agreed to undertake tasks and responsibilities of questionable or minor relevance to their professional career. A recent example would be the numerous contributions of individual faculty in

revising the department graduate program. Another example would be service on department, college and university search and planning committees.

### **Research Values**

Several major values may be listed relating to the department research program.

1. Different types of research are held in high regard and none are denigrated as inferior: basic and applied, or disciplinary, subject matter and problem solving.
2. A balance between the various types of research is greatly valued. department will get into trouble by ignoring either the disciplinary or the multidisciplinary subject matter and problem-solving dimensions of it: research program. Faculty should discuss the appropriate balance at particular point in time. In recent years, most faculty agreed that we have needed to enhance the disciplinary base in the department in order to improve our balance.
3. Publishing is highly valued. Although the department has never emphasized a strict publish-or-perish approach, publication is important. A major issue is the appropriate outlet for publishing. In this respect, two items should be mentioned. First, there has been some controversy in our profession for and against publishing in our major professional journal. Obviously, our journal has become very disciplinary in character over time. However, this does not mean that it should be ignored entirely. A second concern pertains to our departmental staff paper series. This past year, over 100 papers were published. However, some staff papers should also have been published as Agricultural Economics reports, Experiment Station reports, or North Central Agricultural Economics Journal articles with some additional work.
4. Contracts and grants are greatly valued. Obviously, the department would not survive very long (at least in its present form) without the continued infusion of external funds. The amount of external funds generated by individual faculty should vary according to the percentage of research appointment and years of tenure on the faculty. Senior faculty with major research appointments are expected to bring in more external funds than junior faculty, or faculty with minor appointments (other things equal).

### **Extension Values**

Major extension values include:

1. We value extension work at the county, state, national, or international level. For some individual programs, the relevant clientele base of extension appointed faculty has been at the industry or national level. Excellent examples would be work relating to food distribution and agricultural policy. Much public service is also performed outside of formal extension programs.
2. Both content and delivery methods are valued highly by the department in extension programming. However, content is most important. The best delivery methods available will not compensate for poor content.
3. Writing is highly valued. Although extension specialists may not publish in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics to the same extent as researchers, there are certainly many outlets for extension written materials. The written word is an important vehicle in delivering extension programs, as well as a primary means of communicating with one's peers.
4. Timeliness in recognizing and responding to problems in extension is of great value. The "teachable moment" must be recognized and understood by specialists in order to be effective in extension programming.

### **Teaching Values**

Different examples of teaching values include:

1. High value is placed on faculty control of the curricula. Administrators may be forced to cancel some courses because of budget, unavailability of appropriate teachers, or enrollment restraints. However, the courses and curricula offered by the department require faculty approval.
2. Within the constraints of course descriptions and the university teaching code of conduct, great faculty latitude is valued in teaching assigned courses. However, freedom and accountability go hand-in-hand in teaching.
3. Different teaching and advising styles are regarded as valuable. Didactic and heuristic styles may be equally effective for different instructors.

4. All levels of teaching and kinds of students of the Department of Agricultural Economics are highly valued whether: Ag. Tech., undergraduate, M.S., Ph.D. or lifelong.
5. A balance between U.S. and international graduate students is highly valued. Operationally, the department has tried to meet the goal of, a graduate composition of 50 percent domestic, 40 percent international and 10 percent U.S. students interested in development.

### **International Values**

Major international values include:

1. International programs are a highly valued, integral part of the Department. In few departments of agricultural economics, or other departments in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State, has the international dimension been more explicitly recognized.
2. Concentration of international programs and projects in selected areas of the world is valued. The department concentrates its programs in areas where funding is available, faculty have expertise and language capacity, and can recruit graduate students as part of its international projects. For example, the department was heavily involved in Latin America 25 years ago. In the last two decades, the focus of departmental programs has shifted to Africa.
3. The department values four components in its international projects: research, policy analysis, graduate education, and institution building. Wherever possible, the department has attempted to incorporate these components into international projects.
4. We stress the value of a nondevelopment agricultural economics field for our graduate students majoring in development. Such fields make our students more valuable and versatile in their professional career.
5. We value wide cooperation and collaboration of our faculty in international programs. This has been very necessary in securing large international projects. Our cooperation and collaboration in the international area is a worthy model for other areas of the department and college.



## **SUMMARY**

The preceding values have guided departmental thinking and administration for some time. While individual faculty may disagree with a particular value as stated in this paper, these values are widely held by the faculty. Arguments in the department more often hinge around prescriptions to implement these values than about the values themselves.

A knowledge of department values is particularly crucial inasmuch as the department will be undergoing an external review in September 1986, and will host the joint American and Canadian Agricultural Economics Association meeting in August of 1987. In these capacities, our department values will be implied by what we do and say. Some of our senior faculty will also be retiring in the near future. As a consequence, it is important that we know and understand the values we hold and the prescriptions to which those values lead as we plan for the future.