

TEXAS POLICY EDUCATION

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The cornerstone of the Texas policy education program is the timely analysis of relevant issues. Relevance is measured by issues on which decisions must be made. Three focal points exist for those decisions:

- farmers and ranchers,
- policy makers,
- general public.

We make no bones of the fact that our program directly focuses on a producer and policy maker clientele. Education of the general public occurs largely when our educational materials are picked up and disseminated by the media. This producer and policy maker focus is one of necessity not choice — that is all we have time for with the available manpower.

An Integrated Approach

A key reason for the success of the Texas policy education program is its integration of research and extension components. When Dan Padberg interviewed for the job of department head at Texas A&M, he expressed a philosophy that the primary outlet for research is extension. That statement created considerable controversy among those “pure” researchers who viewed journals as the primary outlet for their work. The Policy Center staff was comfortable and pleased with this philosophy — that is the way we have been operating.

Our research program is based upon relevant issues and problems. James Richardson, for example, builds models just like any good theoretician and quantitative economist. The difference is that the models are built to answer real-world questions. They are sufficiently flexible to address new issues as they arise. In addition, the models tend to be oriented toward the impacts on our primary clientele group — farmers and ranchers. The policy makers that we work with are the most interested in these effects. We are, therefore, able to answer questions such as: How much will a particular policy proposal increase the chances of a middle-sized family farm surviving? What size and type of farm will benefit the most from a particular policy?

The other dimension of program integration involves the utilization of commodity specialists in policy education. Seldom is an article written on commodity policy without the specialist in that commodity being directly involved. Some eyebrows were initially raised by those who felt that “policy education is exclusively the domain of the policy educator” or that “commodity specialists do not know anything about policy.” Both of these views are absolutely wrong. They are a function of the insecurity of the policy educator. Obviously the grain marketing specialist has to know grain policy. If he does not, he is not going to be a very good grain specialist.

Program Thrusts

The Policy Center program has two major thrusts:

- *The implications of farm program provisions for producer decisions.* This is where our work in the Center began. As soon as a major farm program is announced researchers and extension commodity and policy specialists meet to plan the analytical analysis of the program’s impact on Texas producers as well as to design a program worksheet for use in analysis of program participation decisions. The basic provisions of the program are discussed as to their impact on Texas producers, and the resulting paper is published in *Food and Fiber Economics*. The worksheet and analysis are also made available in computerized form for most major micro-systems. Producers, farm organizations, and even policy makers have a great deal of interest in these articles, all of which are now jointly authored. We have a goal of having the article out within three weeks of the program announcement. If we do not meet this self-imposed deadline, calls begin coming in.
- *Development and analysis of the consequences of policy options.* Our goal is to subject each major policy issue facing Texas farmers to quantitative analysis. We find farm organization leaders and policy makers more interested in numbers than in verbiage. In policy the “beef” is in the numbers — the quantitative impacts of the policy alternatives. In instances where impacts run in the same direction, policy makers want to know where they get more bang for the buck — in their Congressional District. Providing this information, of course, requires a close working relationship between the researcher and the policy and/or the commodity specialist.

What Makes it Work?

The Center program, as described, has been in operation for about three years. We think it works because of its output and the increased interest in what the Center is doing. More requests are being received from more influential policy makers.

There is no single reason why the Center works. Rather, it is a

combination of the following factors. If we lose any one of them our effectiveness will decline.

- **Teamwork:** Most of our projects are on a team basis. The problem is defined and the objectives clearly identified. The research is completed and an extension publication is drafted. It is not as simple as it sounds. An integrated approach is utilized at every major level of development: one person does the research; another writes the extension publication; the researcher then redrafts it. That way, there are always at least two people who know the subject matter and can respond to requests. In all instances, the resulting publication is reviewed by economists outside of the developmental team before the product is disseminated. Remember, all of this is done within a short time frame — generally less than a month. Thus teamwork is essential.
- **No Turf:** There is no turf in our group. Anyone who thinks he has turf will soon find someone else mowing his lawn. Not that we steal from one another — we do not. But if one person does not have the time or the interest, another one picks up the ball and runs with it. For example, Ed Smith was primarily responsible for the 1985 farm bill attitude survey.
- **Research:** The land-grant system was built on the concept of extending research results. Many departments have lost this concept; we have not. Applied research is a part of almost every project. Our key researcher is James Richardson. His flexible models are used regularly.
- **Resources:** It might be suggested that Texas A&M makes this program work because it has the bucks. Without question, it took money to hire the five Center staff, but it takes teamwork to fully integrate the expertise of the department in meeting a common goal. Virtually every department has a policy researcher and extension person. By working together two individuals can accomplish a surprising amount.
- **Support:** The more involved a policy educator or researcher is in current issues, the more controversial the program is likely to be. We are controversial — that is an understatement. We draw fire from friend and foe alike. We are most effective at deflecting that fire when we have the research numbers to support what is being said. But even then, strong administrative support and understanding are essential. Many of you are undoubtedly aware that the extent of administrative support was recently severely tested in the Center by a politically motivated attack on its staff. We lived through that rough period and are stronger because of it. Every one of us better understands our responsibilities, challenges, and the need for support at all levels. Objectivity, however, is essential regardless of the feathers that are ruffled.

The Center

Reference has been made several times to the Policy Center without describing what it is. The Center is a focal point for agricultural and food policy research, teaching, and extension. Its purpose is to conduct applied research and education programs on agricultural and food policy issues of importance to Texas agriculture.

The idea for the Center came from a Texas agricultural leader — not from within the Texas A&M University System. This individual expressed need for a policy thrust that had impact on decisions — that could be turned to for objective analyses of program options. His idea got into a long-range university plan, and the Center was created by the Board of Regents within one year's time.

It is the intent that the Center be financed primarily from endowments. Those endowments would come from foundations, firms, or individuals not having a direct involvement in the development of agricultural and food policy. The task of raising endowments will begin shortly. In the meantime, the primary base of *extra* funding is from the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and from grants to support particular projects.

Where Are We Headed?

Our evaluation of the work of the Center is one of overall success. Much has been learned. For the most part, the plan is to do more of the same but to do it better. Specific plans for the future include:

- Initiating a strong push in raising endowments. This would provide the extra resources to attack more problems in a more complete manner. A particular need exists for improvement of the quantity and quality of primary data on Texas agriculture.
- Developing a framework for workshops with Texas legislators. Most of our work to date has been one-on-one. Group meetings are more efficient and would have more impact.
- Developing more flexible models having both macro and micro dimensions are needed. Work is proceeding to develop a cotton model where, for example, prices are generated internally, based on the interaction of supply and demand forces, then transformed into farm level impacts.

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