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The Future of Agricultural Education A View From The Bleachers Part II By Gordon I. Swanson

This is the second part of an essay about agricultural education and its future. Included is a consideration of agricultural education in the public schools, in the agricultural extension services and in agricultural colleges. It does not omit an extremely important dimension, agricultural research---its presence, its process and its performance.

Agricultural Extension and Agricultural Instruction in Schools- Change and Vulnerability

Agricultural teachers in schools and agricultural extension workers constitute the largest block of public employees in the agricultural sector. There are about 12000 in each category. Almost all of the teachers live and work in local communities. About half of the extension workers exist at state levels.

The two groups serve the same areas of local geography and the same local clients. Their source of funds is the same; the taxpaying public. Structurally and professionally, the two groups are completely separated. Their professional literature is distinctly separate. Professionals in one group rarely publish in the literature of the other. The individuals in the two groups do not attend each other's conferences. News or information sent by supervisory levels to one group at public expense is not sent to the other. There are few, if any, examples of joint effort to differentiate or join the missions of the two groups to assure coordinated effort or even to assure a more effective use of public resources.

It is not easy to describe how this could happen. It is impossible to justify. Bureaucratic inadequacy and incompetence, perverse ideology, a vacuum of leadership, neglect by the press, legislative indifference and the triumph of a proprietary mode of operation in agricultural colleges - all of these are present. It is the seedbed in which government waste can flourish and mismanagement can thrive.

The literature of both fields shows some growing anxiety and apprehension about the future. It is clear that both fields have begun to feel threatened. Agriculture teaching in schools became a victim of the excellence movement of the 80's. The movement defined a subject-matter route to excellence and agriculture, an elective subject, was crowded out of many schools. Predictably, agricultural colleges reacted with aloofness and indifference. The previously mentioned observation about agricultural extension being a flagrant "taxpayer rip-off" is a part of this growing apprehension. (Lambro 1986)

Both of the fields have undertaken recent efforts to engage in review and evaluation. A recent effort in each field will be mentioned. In 1987, the United States Department of Agriculture and the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service produced a report entitled, Extension in Transition: Bridging the Gap Between Vision and Reality, (Futures Task Force, 1987). The Report rejects the notion that agriculture's idea-marketplace would continue to be driven by the project-funding success of researchers linked to commodity-oriented research orthodoxies. Also it began to

dull the glow of earlier paradigms---the technology transfers, the adoption mystiques and the self-congratulatory excesses which had set the tone for much of the earlier writing. The Report lamented the commodity orientations to which agriculture's research agenda is linked but it offered no actionable alternative. It is written to lead readers to believe that the USDA and the state extension services are independent variables, which they aren't, and that everything influenced by extension is a dependent variable which, again, is untrue. Agricultural teaching is not mentioned in the Report. A holistic view is obviously missing.

In 1988, the National Research Council's Board on Agriculture completed a 3-year study and issued a report entitled, Understanding Agriculture: New Directions For the Future (National Research Council, 1988). The Report offered 12 recommendations. Most are not actionable by the sponsors of the study and the report contains no "new directions for education" to be taken by colleges of agriculture. The Report is clearly indicative of how the Board on Agriculture of the NCR is, in its membership and its actions, among the most tradition-bound organizations in existence. There is almost no likelihood that the Report will have even the slightest effect on the agenda or mission of colleges of agriculture in the United States.

A Goal Worth Achieving

The Agricultural Colleges of the United States have gone through several self-assessments and reviews. Most have occurred in individual institutions, none has been planned deliberately for the system as a whole. I say deliberately because the one which occurred in November 12-16, 1961 was not intended to be a critique of the system; it was intended to be a festival of accolades describing the achievements of the system on its 100th birthday. It was the Centennial Convention of the American Association of Land-Grant Colleges and the State Universities holding their 75th annual convention in Kansas City, Missouri. Invited to give comments on

two major presentations on the evaluation of the system was Dr. Theodore Schultz, a Professor at the University of Chicago who had attended one Land-Grant College, served as a Department Chairman in another and who later became a Nobel Laureate in economics for his work in human capital formation.

Dr. Schultz, a caring iconoclast, moved quickly to his task. Some of his main points are enumerated below (Schultz, 1961):

1. Quality of Instruction "The quality of instruction is declining. The growth in enrollment should not be regarded on "simply a demand for more of the instruction that was supplied in the past. The growing demand for higher education is in no way incompatible with a higher education oriented toward agriculture."
2. Cultural and Intellectual Attributes of Science and Technology "Agricultural Colleges have not capitalized on the cultural and intellectual attributes of science and technology. Higher education does not have the burden of choosing between the sciences and the liberal arts because both are essential. The real choice is how they are to be taught in undergraduate instruction.

The nation has received a very high return on its investment in science and technology associated with agriculture. But the benefits of this investment have gone largely to consumers, not to farmers. This should be readdressed but it cannot be done with the current emphasis on commodity departments or by having the college seek a release from their most important comparative advantage---undergraduate instructions."

3. The Value of Student Time "A major defect of higher education is the tendency to treat student time as if it were a free resource. Ending

the waste of student time through a few basic reforms--better use of space, better use of faculty and easier access to instruction is possible in every college of agriculture."

4. Increase in Part-Time Instruction and Research "The competition from outside incentives and other forces have diminished the proportion of full-time faculty and diminished, accordingly, the possibility of pursuing the goals of quality where they are most needed."

Professor Schultz moved quickly to his most important point, a point which he called a "neglected opportunity of major magnitude, so close and such a natural part of the task of Land Grant colleges that it is hard to believe that it could be overlooked all these years. But it is not in plants and animals, soils and yields, growth regulators or genetic improvements or in the fundamentals of science that open doors to the development of new and better techniques of production. The neglected opportunity is in the education of farm people." "The education of farm people" Schultz continued, "lags behind most other groups in the nation. They are the least benefitted from science and technology, even much of what has occurred in agriculture."

Schultz added that "Agricultural college officials will say, "Too bad, but elementary and high schools, even those in agriculture are not our business" Schultz responds, "Nor is farming your business but you have contributed greatly to it. You can also develop and mobilize intellectual resources in behalf of the schools which serve farmers and their children."

At the end of the conference, Professor Schultz concluded that the neglected opportunity for agricultural colleges and the central purpose of the Morrill Act is "still open to them." Now, almost three decades later, as we prepare to enter the last decade of the

century, the opportunity has not been seized. It is still open!!!

Imperatives for the Future of Agricultural Education

In considering the future, there should be no mystique or guesswork even though the future may include a great deal of uncertainty. The future will be influenced by forces presently at work which are likely to continue. Some may exert stronger influences in the future, some may weaken and some entirely new forces may appear on the scene. Becoming informed about the future involves the orderly process of analyzing the influence of these forces.

Some would argue that a better way to consider the future is to invent alternative scenarios of the future and to carefully analyze the comparative costs and consequences of each scenario. This is not greatly different from the first example but it has the advantage of presenting a mix or a configuration of forces at work.

The first and most important imperative for the future of agricultural education is to focus on people. This is the unfinished work of American's most important educational reform, the Morrill Act of 1862. Elevating human possibilities among rural people is the most important goal which agricultural education can pursue.

A second imperative for the future is to recognize, and act upon, agriculture's leadership crisis. Here it would be a mistake to limit a focus on the simple ability of individuals to convene, to appoint or to manage budgets. This is merely the ability to utilize assigned power. What is imperative for the future is the ability to identify and hone the creative talents of people and to direct these toward elevating human possibilities. Contrived leadership has had its turn. It is now time for real leadership.

A third imperative for the future involves recapturing a creative role for science and technology in agriculture and for rural people. This means that ways should be sought for every aspect of rural life to be informed by inquiry with agricultural colleges leading the inquiry

and also the informing process. Agriculture and rural people need not become the residual claimants of new technology; those who receive it should become prior claimants; those among the first to benefit from advancing technology, not only to maximize production but to conserve productive capacity.

A fourth imperative for the future of agricultural education is to recognize and to reduce the effect of ideological rigidities, the propensity to find one best way to do things and to find it excessively easy to substitute means for ends. Agricultural education needs a massive renewal of intellectual life. The best way to begin is through introspection, an acceptance of pluralism and a willingness to be in the forefront in educational thought and practice.

To reach such a future during the 21st century, agricultural education needs more than tinkering, it needs a thorough transformation.

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Current Notes

By Edgar Persons

The Agricultural Education Division of the Department of Vocational and Technical Education has introduced three major modifications of their education program. Persons can prepare for teaching agriculture and associated education careers by completing the B.S. degree in Agricultural Education. Persons with a strong interest in the domestic and international development that is made possible by those informed about the role and techniques of education would find the Agricultural Development option valuable.

Persons who hold a degree in other agricultural fields and through experience and personal conviction would like to meet the licensure requirements for teaching agriculture in the public school, can enroll in the post-baccalaureate licensure program in agricultural education where one full year of study will provide the necessary preparation for teaching licensure. For further information contact:

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