

DISCUSSION: AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE CURRICULA: ARE WE COMPETITIVE?

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Upon reading the title to Professor Williams' paper, my first impulse was to congratulate him for asking an important question that needs to be asked repeatedly by those of us involved in teaching. Yet toward the end of his paper, Professor Williams says that had he selected the title of the paper himself (rather than having it assigned by the program committee), he would have deleted the question, "Are we competitive?" He cannot answer the question, Professor Williams says, and he implies that his inability to provide an answer causes the title of his paper to be inappropriate.

Professor Williams is hardly alone in not having the answer to this question. No one seems to know the answer. Yet that does not change the need to keep asking it. Indeed, the scheduling of a paper on the topic at this meeting suggests that it is a question now on the minds of more and more of us as we see enrollments in agriculture plunge at most land-grant universities and the domestic supply of graduate students shrink. The question hangs over us and casts a deep, dark shadow.

Williams posits an imperfectly competitive market model as an analytical framework within which we might think about the question. By so framing the question, he suggests that agricultural economists have a methodology and a set of tools that might be useful in examining our teaching programs. Not only are our graduates selling themselves in an imperfectly competitive market, but teaching institutions are also selling their product (i.e., their graduates) in a similar market. Once we recognize this, we ought to be able to design research that will provide insights into the answer to the question posed in Williams' title.

For instance, it would be useful to know the extent to which (if any) the market provides a

premium for students finishing different sorts of curricula. Carefully controlled econometric studies of the starting salaries (or bid prices) for graduates in agricultural economics across institutions with different curricula might be useful. Similar studies comparing starting salaries for graduates of both business school programs and programs in agricultural economics might provide additional insights.

Occasionally, some agricultural economist like Broder turns his or her research skills to examining the effectiveness of teaching programs. Yet these have been sporadic efforts. So far as I know, there are no systematic efforts at any institution in the country to use our own methodology and tools to examine what we are doing in teaching and to uncover ways we might do it better. One can argue that we could devote too many of our resources to such introspective activities, but surely a failure to devote some resources to such activities on a systematic basis is indicative of the low priority that has been given undergraduate teaching by our profession.

Professor Williams also makes a point of the lack of agricultural or farm backgrounds on the part of an increasingly large number of our students. The potential pool of students from a farm background has been shrinking and likely will continue to do so. This means that first-hand knowledge of routine farm operations can no longer be assumed for our students.

Professor Williams argues that our comparative advantage in agricultural economics programs lies in their hybrid nature—the combining of knowledge of technical agriculture with the analytical skills of economics and management science. Yet if the students no longer have knowledge of agriculture from their farm backgrounds, they have to acquire

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it, along with the economics and business skills, after coming to the college or university, or else we lose our comparative advantage. Is it realistic to expect that most students can do this within the constraints of the usual four year, twelve quarter, or eight semester program customary for a baccalaureate degree?

I suggest that, given the way our curricula are now structured, we are asking for more than can be delivered. The programs are either thin in technical agriculture or thin in economics and business or thin in both. The result is that increasingly we are serving up some rather weak tea to the job market. There seems to be a trend at many institutions toward strengthening the economics and business segment of our curricula at the expense of technical agriculture. The result is agricultural economics curricula that differ only slightly from those of the business schools.

Not long ago, our colleague W. J. Milon ventured to ask me the heretical question whether there was any justification for offering business school curricula in colleges of agriculture if they are not different in important ways from those offered in the business schools. Perhaps in the past when a large number of our students came from farms, such curricula had a place in agricultural colleges because students could relate principles of economics and business to the significant knowledge of agriculture they already possessed. But if that justification was valid in the past, it is less so today and will be even less so in the future as more and more of our students come from the city or the suburb. And if more and more of our students do not come from the city or the suburb, it is not likely we will have very many students.

I cannot avoid the conclusion that we need a new, radically different approach toward the education of agricultural students. The disciplinary-oriented curricula in agronomy or animal science or agricultural economics should give way to fewer, more multidisciplinary curricula in agricultural science (for those aspiring to scientific careers) or agricultural management (for those headed toward agribusiness or farm operations). My sabbatical experience last year in Australia showed me that there are ways other than that generally used in U.S. agricultural colleges to educate students. Others who have observed the Australian approach have unfavorable impressions of it, but for my part,

the approach used at the University of New England and in the farm management programs at Hawkesbury and Marcus Oldham are worth our consideration as possible models for fashioning the needed new approach (see Bawden et al.).

Focusing as he does on curricula, Professor Williams does not give a great deal of attention to graduate programs. Since, at least in principle, every graduate student pursues a different plan of study, only the most general things can be said about graduate curricula. But because the market for persons with graduate degrees is smaller and more easily observed than that for those with baccalaureate degrees, there does seem to be some tendency for institutions to converge in the basic content of graduate programs, mimicking what are perceived to be the programs (particularly, Ph.D. programs) that are most successful in placing their graduates. I would argue that convergence is dangerous.

If agricultural economics is a discipline, or even a sub-discipline, it follows that the practitioners must possess a common core of knowledge and method. Some standardization, particularly in master's programs, may be desirable. Yet if convergence goes too far, the profession will lack the diversity that allows its members to occupy a wide variety of professional and scholarly niches. Alan Randall has made a strong case for diversity in the approach to natural resource economics, and that same case for diversity also would seem to apply to other areas of specialty within agricultural economics. No one approach is likely to be capable of uncovering the whole truth when the subject is as complex as those of the social sciences. Moreover, the approach that works best now may not be that which will work best five or ten years from now. The more niches agricultural economists can occupy, the greater our ability to adapt and survive as a discipline and a profession. It is a way of hedging our bets. If we go too far in standardizing the product emerging from our graduate programs, we flirt with professional extinction.

Professor Williams raises a great many more important points—the need for foreign language training, the balance between micro and macroeconomics in the curriculum, the stigma some students feel is attached to agriculture as a field of study—all of which deserve discussion if time would allow. In bringing these and other matters to our attention, Williams has met the charge he was

given in preparing this paper. He has also challenged us to think that perhaps agricultural economists should give higher priority to

teaching (particularly, undergraduate teaching) than we have been doing. I am pleased to associate myself with such a challenge.

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