

DISCUSSION: HUMAN CAPITAL NEEDS OF BLACK LAND-GRANT INSTITUTIONS

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Parks and Robbins have prepared a paper on an interesting and timely topic for the Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA) meeting. First, the black land-grant institutions will soon be celebrating a century of outstanding service to southern rural and urban clientele, as well as the nation (Smith; Williams). Second, this year, being the seventy-fifth anniversary of our parent organization, the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA), might be an opportune time for the Association to critically evaluate its collective contributions to the institutional and human resource developmental efforts of this component of the land-grant complex.

The authors approached the topic from the following vantage points: (a) a review of factors associated with current and projected shortages of agricultural scientists, including agricultural economists, (b) a review of trends in the supply and demand for persons with graduate training in agricultural economics, (c) a review of some of the relevant theoretical and empirical issues relating to blacks in the agricultural economics labor market, and (d) evaluative observations relating to the interactive impacts of labor market and institutional factors on the agricultural economics capital stocks of black land-grant institutions.

Some of the issues raised in the paper have recently been the focal point of professional dialogue at the national level (Davis and Allen; Jones et al; Robbins and Evans; Strauss and Tarr). The paper has contributed to the professional dialogue by: (a) identifying some of the key issues in the debate, (b) presenting an outline of certain issues which serve to direct our thinking, and (c) highlighting some of the policy and program agenda items for the profession relative to these issues. This discussion will attempt to refine some of the issues raised relative to the agricultural eco-

nomics human capital needs of black land-grant institutions and will offer some additional viewpoints on certain issues and implications. This approach is intended to provide a more identifiable contextual framework for analysis of the issues that were presented by Parks and Robbins.

The discussion and issues presented by Parks and Robbins could have been more effectively presented if the arguments were developed within the following contextual sequence. First, establish very early in the paper, a sense of the historical and evolutionary characteristics of the role, scope, and service dimensions of the black land-grant institutions as they adjusted to structural changes in the agricultural and rural sectors. Second, review and assess the facilitating contributions of the agricultural economics profession to the changing institutional objectives and clientele needs of the institutions. Third, highlight any disciplinary tendencies that might have or are still imposing constraints on the ability of the profession to respond facilitatively to the evolving institutional and human capital needs of these institutions.

Within the context of these three inter-related dimensions, the paper could have been improved by reviewing the evolutionary and greatly expanded mission and service role of the black land-grant institutions. The original sixteen 1890 Land-Grant Institutions were charged with the responsibility of developing educational, extension, and research programs for rural black people. However, technological revolution in the agricultural sector triggered major resource adjustment problems for rural blacks. By virtue of legislative mandate and sensitivity to clientele needs, these institutions were forced to expand their role, scope, and services to a disproportionate number of black, poor, and

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socially alienated segment of the population (Smith; Williams). This point is emphasized because it could have been used by Parks and Robbins to forcefully emphasize the important and far-reaching point that the 1890 Land-Grant Institutions did not discover the "People Left Behind" in the 1960's as was the case for many 1862 institutions. These 1890 institutions have worked for and have been a major access route for blacks, and alienated poor people into the American economic mainstream.

An important implication of this evolutionary role and scope of the 1890 institutions is that they have been, by necessity, at the forefront of human resource development efforts for the economically and socially disadvantaged. Furthermore, to a great extent these efforts were neutral with respect to the locational and/or vocational preferences of clientele groups. Equally important is the fact that these activities dealt with the entire range of labor supply variables, including migration. This heavy commitment to human resource development efforts by these institutions was documented in a 1974 *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics (SJAE)* paper by Davis. Parks and Robbins could have developed this theme and used it to explain why 1890 institutions have accorded higher priority to and consistently allocated a relatively large proportion of their financial and intellectual resources to teaching, extension, and research efforts in such areas as manpower training, health, education, management skills, vocational rehabilitation, and adjustment strategies for limited resource and part-time farmers. An interesting sub-theme could have been developed around such issues as to how: (a) the collective analytical and policy-directing capabilities of the agricultural economics profession have (or have not) been attuned to and/or applied to these subject matter areas within the black land-grant institutions, (b) the absence (or presence) of relevant agricultural economics capabilities at these institutions have or can affect the long term programmatic activities of these institutions, and (c) the void in general agricultural economics capabilities are being met.

The paper could also have been made more interesting if additional efforts were made to evaluate in "harder" terms, the relationship between the availability and application of agricultural economics capabilities to human resource issues at black land-grant institutions, and the available pool of blacks and other minority professional agricultural economists at such institutions. Survey data from the AAEA Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Agricultural Economics Profession could have been drawn on for this purpose. Such a relationship would be useful information for addressing the policy implications of underrepresentation of blacks in the profession. In this regard, Bawden attributes the lack of disciplinary concern for black and other minority problems to the underrepresentation of such groups in the profession (p.885). He argues that one reason why agricultural economists have been so successful in dealing with problems of farm communities is that a large proportion were reared on farms. As such, they were intimately familiar with the subject prior to entering graduate school. He then extended this argument to make a case for greater minority representation in the profession. In short, he argued that greater minority representation in the profession would ensure increased sensitivity to, knowledge of, and willingness to address minority related issues and problems.

There are strong indications in the paper that Parks and Robbins are in agreement with Bawden on this point. They could have gone a step further and noted some of the broader national and regional policy issues relating to: (a) professional commitment to increased black representation in the discipline, (b) alternative operational mechanisms for translating philosophical commitment and goodwill into effective action, and (c) programmatic changes in the scope and depth of mission oriented agricultural economics training to serve black land-grant institutions' clientele. In critically examining these particular issues, the profession may uncover valuable information relating to the long-term growth potential and survival strategies for the profession.

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