Leadership Development and Challenges in Agricultural and Applied Economics in Academic Units: A Conversation with Unit Leaders

Presidential Address
For the
Western Agricultural Economics Association
Annual meeting

June 2009

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Motivation

• Six leaders in my unit at K-State in last five years
  – Cost of inaction has been very high
• My involvement on two search committees
  – Difficulty in recruiting
• My work with agribusiness firms
  – Need for talent and leadership is inherent in any organization
  – Great implications for our ability to move forward
• Started with WAEA interviews and expanded to other departments
Objective

• My objective is to discuss why the unit leader has the most critical job in the department and why this position has great challenges.
  – Provide an overview of information collected from interviews with unit leaders of departments of agricultural economics and discuss challenges being faced by these unit leaders.
  – Conducted 47 interviews with unit leaders of departments of agricultural economics in 1862 land grant universities and four other departments with large enrollments
  – Visited with eight deans about my paper and slides.
  – Thanks to a number of people
• Has not been studied widely in our profession.
Main Points

• The unit leader position is too important a job to be left to the “last man” standing

• We, as a profession, have to be proactive in funding our graduate and extension programs and have outstanding undergraduate teaching experiences if we want the lifestyles and careers we presently have
  – Departmental service will have to matter for all of us

• Deans and provosts do want us to create a vision for our program that fits the mission of the land grant university
  – Requires a lot of work

• Need to find a way to develop leadership talent
  – There has been very little formalized process in our profession

• Be nice!
Outline

• Broad descriptive data
  – Paper has more detail
• Overview of broad issues
• My thoughts and conclusions
• Unit leader – chair, director, or head of a department of agricultural economics
  – Used “agricultural economics” because it is used in WAEA but recognize its limitations
  – Chairs and heads are used interchangeably
    • Deans make little distinction but faculty do
• Colleges of Agriculture
  – Many have broader stakeholders today
  – We will look more like the rest of the university in the future
Unit Leader Years of Experience

- 36 with five years or less of experience;
- 25 with three years or less
March 2009 Graduate Enrollments

13 programs > 60 MS/ MBA/PhD students
March 2009 Undergraduate Enrollments

Red = AGEC
Blue = non AGEC
Lecturers average three or more per department
Role of Program Leaders

• Graduate program
  – Had greatest responsibilities in virtually every department (e.g., 10-50% time)
• Undergraduate
  – 16 had merged with committee chair (e.g., 10-30% time)
  – Many had a full time non-tenure track coordinator
• Extension
  – 40 had no extension state leaders (180 FTEs)
• Almost all heads reported having had some former program leader experience but this does not prepare you for the job
• Assistant or associate heads
  – Prevalent in larger departments and focused on grants and contracts and reporting
  – Better preparation for unit leader position
Graduate Student Funding

86% of doctoral students were on funding

46% of masters students were on funding

61% of all graduate students on funding;
24% of these on hard $ with almost 70 percent being GTAs
N = 886
Supply of Agricultural Economists is Declining in Last Ten Years

2002-07 five year average is same as 1961-65.
Dissertations Written in Production Economics, Agricultural Inputs, and Trade

Measured from a population of 9,100 agecon dissertations since 1951
The supply and demand for doctorates in agricultural economics

- 921 faculty vitas were identified from 51 departments
  - 20.7% are estimated to be over age of 60
    - Almost 50% will be 65 or older by 2017 (no entry assumption)
    - Expertise in marketing, production economics, and agribusiness
- Small Farms program has more funding than Markets and Trade this year
- USDA National Needs graduate fellowships in these topics?
  - Horticulture (commercial and small farm management), agribusiness policy (international issues)
  - Teaching component
- Future hires in next five years will have more extension and undergraduate teaching appointments
- Difficult to find doctoral students in commercial agriculture
Traditional View of Units

• “Adam Smith” Approach
  – Hire independent agents in faculty who pursued individual goals that, in aggregate, resulted in the common good of the department, college, and university
    • Departments were big enough such that some faculty could pursue goals of the dean / provost (“applied research and teaching”) and some could pursue the goals of the profession (“research scholars”)
  – Unit leader and dean positions did not change much over time
    • Had some appreciation for all dimensions of scholarship
  – This worked when departments had critical mass
Today’s View of Units?

• “AgEcon” units lack critical mass in many cases
  – Many departments are ½ size relative to 20 years ago
• Training fewer graduate students
  – Important role in research scholarship function
• Extension has already been reduced over time
• Unit leader position has shorter tenure
• Demands of dean and provost are more immediate with short-term objectives
• Role of development and overseeing relationships with stakeholders is a large function for departments
• Role of faculty entrepreneurship will increase in the future

• Most WAEA departments face these trends
Unit Leader has most difficult job in the university

- Increasingly difficult to reconcile the interests of faculty with interests of the organization and this is different from the traditional view
- Graduate schools and university organizations do not prepare us for leadership
- Potential for friction and conflict is very high
  - Faculty and unit leader; unit leader and dean
- Shorter shelf life
  - What should be the life of a unit leader position?
- More interims and less ability to hire external (only five outside hires)
  - The cost of inaction is too great in a department with an interim
- Need to grow talent internally
  - Rotate program leadership positions (no more than six years) and evaluate their performance
  - Develop role of associate unit leader?
- Create economic incentives and expectations
Challenge of Alignment and Relationship with the Dean

- Collective vision is needed and constant reinforcement at faculty meetings
- This is even more critical with large number of new unit leaders
- Difficulty in seeing vision with budget issues dominating the current environment
- Evaluate in hiring, promotion, tenure, and post-tenure review
  - Finding individuals with this alignment is difficult
  - Asked to tenure someone in a short period of time
  - Scholarship, grants, and instructional ability are long-term
- We are “difficult” to get along with in a college and university
  - Marc Johnson’s 2007 presentation explained why
  - But agecon is perceived as being more difficult
- Unit leaders discussed the HR issue and its daily grind as a drawback
- Need to educate us to better understand the external environment
  - We are good at understanding incentives but not the “people” factor
Expectations of a Dean in a Unit Leader are Sometimes Different than Faculty Expectations

• Unit leaders indicate the job is different than they thought when they applied
  – Interacting with stakeholders
  – Faculty motivation
  – Working with potential donors
  – Handling conflict
  – Job with maximum friction in the university
  – Evaluation process
• Has implications for search committees and “best economist” approach
• Moving forward this may be a more hostile environment if units are not careful
  – Deans control new positions
  – Lack of retirements (cannot go a decade w/o hiring)
Unit leader has to provide and implement a vision for the undergraduate program.

- Sustaining and growing undergraduate enrollment
  - Service courses must be accessible
    - Multicultural learner outcome
  - Minors must be user-friendly
  - Non-traditional teaching schedule
  - Use of labs
  - Departmental mergers to gain efficiencies
    - Can we afford to teach introductory and intermediate microeconomics in two different units?

- Quality of experiences is needed – Huge issue
  - Honors thesis
  - Study tours
  - Advising and mentoring

- Need flexible dollars (expendables) and endowments
- Difficult to have a department of teaching specialists
- What fits the WAEA units?
Unit leader has to provide and implement a vision for the graduate program.

- Graduate program needed to help recruit talent
  - Synergies with departments of economics
  - Fewer need for graduate classes (small numbers, vanity classes, etc.)
- Faculty must generate funds to make it viable
  - Need to target students for grant projects and tasks
  - Quality of teaching assistants
- Need faculty with flexible research skills and interests
  - Difficult to have a department of research specialists
  - Some part of program must be commercial agriculture focus
    - Stakeholders demand it
- Increased need for interdisciplinary work
  - Social scientists on grants with bench scientists
  - Joint appointments?
- WAEA graduate programs?
Unit leader has to provide and implement a vision for extension and fee for service programs.

- Extension programs need to generate fee for service income
  - 2 programs with greater than $500k;
    - Agribusiness with some commercial ag focused
    - Both programs have a distance MBA /MAB
  - Several around $100k; remainder have much less
    - Mostly commercial ag and service providers
- More demand in US
  - Crop farming – definitely yes
  - Livestock – yes / no
  - Sundowner farmer
- Need the scholarship to generate the quality of instruction that people are willing to pay for
- Need critical mass to pursue these activities
- WAEA extension programs?
Other Challenges for Unit Leaders

• Nine month appointments asked for by new hires
  – Need to handle in evaluation of faculty performance but, in general, 11 month expectations are expected of faculty on nine months
  – Not a big issue with regard to mix of salary vs. graduate student
    • “Positive correlation” between faculty paying themselves summer salary and graduate students, etc.

• Mentoring new faculty
  – Unit leaders worried about this a lot
  – More general economists (non “traditional ag econ”) entering departmental talent pools and many leader cited a “hit or miss” philosophy
  – 16 assistant professors have exited departments voluntarily since 1999
    • Not mentored properly? Or just “bad” hires?

• Departmental rankings
  – Needed by deans for resources between colleges
  – Research is what is easy to rank
Professional Societies Need to Find Ways to Maintain Their Relevance

• Unit leaders are asking us to reduce transactions costs
  – Vital part of our networks, creativity, dissemination of new ideas, and profession
  – Page charge issues
  – Membership fees (seven departments pay membership fees)
  – Many meetings (e.g., my field of agribusiness management)
  – Find ways to eliminate duplication and cost savings
  – Less faculty funds for travel
• Define the issue of scholarship more broadly

• WAEA has family-oriented meetings with a joint meeting every third year and budget appears to be under control
Bottom Line!

• Understand and contribute to the collective vision for your unit and college
  – Professional societies can help
• Be nice to these folks! They are in difficult but very important jobs.
• Need to grow internal talent
  – Expectations of faculty regarding service in department
  – Rotate leadership positions
  – Develop an associate head position?
• Unit leader positions are too important to leave to “last person standing”
• Cost of inaction is too high
What does this mean for WAEA?

• Likely more merging of departments
  – More shared governance of graduate programs
  – Takes time to build relationships
• Difficulty in recruiting faculty who understand the issues of “West”
  – Need for some commercial ag focus
• We do not look the same in WAEA
  – Units on the eastern fringe of the WAEA have larger enrollments and faculty
  – Western fringe has more ‘econ’ focus
  – But WAEA has good attendance and relevance
• Talent and leadership is more critical for us because of our size, state budgets and location.
• WAEA schools, in general, have been hiring from higher level agecon programs and talent is not an issue but knowledge of commercial ag is
My term as WAEA President

• My overall responsibilities include
  – Planning 2010 annual meeting in Denver
  – Convening executive meetings
  – Newsletter
  – Fiduciary responsibility on the budget
  – Other duties

• The 2010 meetings are joint with AAEA. I was WAEA VP for the last joint meetings in Portland
  – My philosophy is to ensure that WAEA has its own unique program in Denver
Our Program in Denver

• One day program (Tuesday) with no selected papers
• Two concurrent sessions offered in three time slots with four speakers per session.
  – 2 sessions * 3 time slots * 4 speakers = 24 speakers
• Each WAEA department will nominate an Outstanding Graduate Student Alumnus who will be invited to Denver for the program (easy access)
  – Criteria will be outlined in next newsletter
    • Use the WAEA council structure
  – Alumnus will speak for 15-20 minutes and 10-15 minutes for questions
• WAEA faculty moderators and hosts
Our Program in Denver

• Breakfast awards ceremony
• Two sets of speakers (2 slots @ 4 speakers @ 2 sessions)
• Luncheon program
  – Ticketed meal function
  – WAEA unit leaders will award a certificate to their alumnus and thank them
  – Speaker(s) discussing industry-university relationships
• Ensure industry guests are available for breaks and meals
• Final set of speakers
• Presidential address
• Business Meeting

• AAEA reunions
Questions?