

Collaboration and Institutional Innovation

The intended purpose of this article is to provide a policy educator's perspective on issues that are likely to affect agriculture, food, and its related industries, resources, and interests for the remainder of the 21st century. That is a tall order for an educator who spent more time in the last century than in the current one in a discipline that is less than a century old. The past is not prologue for the future. This article does review the author's perceptions regarding public policy education history, track record, changing environment, development of new institutional models, and continuous search for resources. The challenge in addressing this topic is to make a few key points regarding the relevance and importance of collaboration and institutional innovations in public policy education without too much wandering around. It is hard to boil one's chosen profession down to a few lessons learned for the sake of posterity. But how else can we expect the next generation to learn from our efforts, successes, and mistakes.

Perceptions From Looking Back

Farm Foundation's activities in supporting the National Policy Conference for 50 plus years played a critical role in enhancing the performance of land grant university extension policy education professionals across the country. Coupled with its ongoing commitment toward multi-state and national projects, Farm Foundation has played a catalytic role in molding these disparate human assets into a national network that addressed a wide range of important policy issues that influence agricultural industries and rural people. As an institution, Farm Foundation has demonstrated an example of what can be accomplished by seeding collaboration and institutional innovation on a national scale.

Seasoned professionals attended the National Policy Conference to learn policy education frameworks for emerging issues and to hear the latest findings from nationally recognized policy researchers and experts. New policy education professionals attended the National Policy Conference to learn the principles and methods for conducting objective policy education programs and to integrate themselves into a national professional network. In turn, all participants used the opportunity to incorporate new material into their state and local policy education programs throughout the year.

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Many of the public policy education stalwarts refer to the first 25 years of the National Policy Conference as the golden era for policy education. University budgets were expanding. The numbers of university and extension public policy education positions across the country were increasing as university budgets expanded. Participation in the annual national policy conferences peaked at an all time high with more than 150 participants. A number of high profile projects were successfully conducted nationally, adding stature to the national network for conducting relevant programs for the relevant clientele interests.

Before we conclude that this growth and success was due solely to the efforts of the professionals who organized and benefited at that time, it is well to remember the context. The national network of public policy education emerged out of the earlier interest by agricultural economics professionals who were engaged in assisting agricultural and rural leaders in understanding the choices relating to a maturing agriculture and rural America. The policy setting and seeds for economic growth were established during the years prior to the first National Policy Conference.

In many ways, the context and flavor of our modern world has been created by events that occurred prior to and during World War II. At the end of WWII, the U.S. represented half of the world's economy and was the dominant military power. With *big stick* diplomacy, the U.S. provided leadership in establishing the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. These four international institutional innovations provided the structure and context for multinational policy coordination mechanisms that are used today for resolving political disputes, promoting economic development, encouraging trade liberalization, and coordinating monetary policy and exchange among the nations of the world.

In another vein of structure and context, World War II also created a new enlightened generation of young leaders and citizens returning from war with a global understanding of the consequences of political, economic, and societal systems that operate under tyranny, without rule of law, and without freedom to choose. After the calamity of war, the *greatest generation* was ready to come home, get to work, apply its new-found skills and knowledge, make a living, make a home, have a family, and prosper in peace. It produced the baby boom generation. The one-third boost in the birth rate provided a dominant demographic statistic that has influenced domestic economic, political, social, and institutional changes during the past 50 years.

A third vein of structure and context was created by pre-WWII conditions. The closing of the western frontier and Great Depression generated unprecedented unemployment, farm exodus, and rural poverty. It caused a rethinking of national policy and government's role in agriculture and rural society. Prior to this time, we were essentially a nation where most of the American population lived on farms and in rural areas. Things were so bad during the Depression that one South Dakota market quotation recalled in Don Paarlberg's book, *American Farm Policy*, cited "#2 shelled

corn at 4 cents per bushel, #3 shelled corn at 2 cents per bushel, and eared corn 3 cents less."

It was during this era, that the nation moved from a market-oriented settlement policy to a *new deal* of public policy with government intervention into markets and safety net programs. Related to agriculture, were policies and institutional innovations designed to address the farm surplus, farm income, and rural poverty problems. Acreage set-asides, grain reserves, and price and income supports served as the core of agricultural policy for the next 63 years. This era fostered an emerging agricultural economics profession and need for new institutional innovations to deal with the consequences of periodic rural surpluses. Some leaders of the profession were increasingly asked to serve as advisors to policymakers and educators for clientele leaders and citizens. The National Policy Conference was established in 1950 and represented an institutional innovation that Farm Foundation sponsored. It was consistent with a Jeffersonian style of democracy that was emerging.

The *greatest generation* placed priority on channeling the technological progress that won the war toward domestic economic productivity and growth, earning a higher income, educating their kids, and generating an opportunity for the higher quality of life. The mantra was to create an opportunity for a better life than that experienced by their parents during the Great Depression when they were kids. The U.S. economic engines started in many sectors and provided the context for unprecedented growth for succeeding generations. Unprecedented numbers of youth went to school, so decision-makers built more schools throughout the whole country. Unprecedented numbers of high school graduates went to college, so college enrollments broke new records in the 1970s. In many ways the golden era of policy education was created by the same underlying societal demographic trends and consequences on university budgets during a modern era of enlightenment.

If the first 25 years of the National Policy Conference could be referred to as the golden era for universities, extension, and public policy education, the last 25 might be referred to as the era of retrenchment, reinvention, and entrepreneurial innovation. The winds of change occurred in the institutional context and in educational tastes and preferences of the American public. In addition to identifying the relevant emerging issues, a dominant reoccurring theme emerging during the National Policy Conferences of the 1990s was the needed adjustments in the national network and program delivery to provide a sustaining environment for conducting policy education work.

Over the course of the past 50 plus years, many agricultural policy researchers and extension education professionals have collaborated with Farm Foundation in one fashion or another on a wide variety of policy education projects. While the Foundation's goal may have been its mandate of serving as a catalyst for change and adjustment in Agriculture and rural America, the incentive for policy researchers and extension educators was that collaboration with Farm Foundation represented an

opportunity to pool resources, access expertise, and generate a much greater capacity to accomplish outcomes than could have been accomplished in isolation.

The topics from the 1953 National Policy Conference included: Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, Wheat Price Policy in the United States, Questions Faced in Developing a Public Policy Program, Political Parties and Pressure Group Considerations in Agricultural Politics. In 1954, the focus turned to "Expanding Outlets for American Farm Products, Alternative Methods for Stabilizing Farm Income, and Increasing the Effectiveness of Public Policy Education. In 1955, the topics included Taxation in Relation to Changing Demands for Services, Water Problems and Policies; Economic Growth and Stability; and Problems of Low-Income People in Rural Areas.

Part of the initial purpose of the National Policy Conference, was to bring together some of the best minds of the profession to examine the principles and methods for effective policy education. J. Carroll Bottum articulated the basic objectives of policy education as follows: (1) to develop an active interest in public issues, (2) to increase understanding about the facts, issues, and values involved, (3) to increase people's ability to make judgments based on evidence and logic, and (4) to create the desire and ability to participate effectively in solutions to public issues (*Journal of Farm Economics*, Vol. 37, No. 5, Proceedings Number [December 1955], pp. 1307-15). J. B. (Heavy) Kohlmeyer outlined the alternatives and consequence best practices for conducting policy education on controversial issues in a manner that would allow the presenter to objectively educate the audience and survive (*American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 51, No. 5, Proceedings Issue [December 1969], pp. 1357-64).

Fast forward to 1998 and 1999 and the National Policy Conference topics included Agricultural International Trade Policy; Foods Safety Policy and Issues; Land Use on the Rural-Urban Interface; Consequences of Government Devolution on Agriculture, Communities, and Families; Immigration and the Changing Face of Rural America; and Regulation of Concentrated, Animal Feeding Operations. What changed? One cannot argue that the importance and relevance of the topics changed. In fact, it could be argued that such topics are of more importance in today's interdependent world than they were more than 50 years ago when the world was less interdependent.

A viewpoint from inside the profession suggests that there were significant direction shifts in the availability of resources across states, the commitment of institutions, the erosion of positions, and the emergence of specialized centers and clientele interests. The internal view was a response to external societal changes including declining farm numbers, increasing farm size and specialization, rural out-migration of youth, and an aging rural population base, advancements in transportation, communications, and perceptions about where the future opportunities were located.

Lessons Learned as a Young Professional

As a professional, I came of age at the beginning of the second 25 years, and signs about the winds of change were already apparent. I have attended every National Policy Conference since 1981. I attended out of the need to hear the latest perspectives on issues that I was dealing with in my home state as a policy educator. When you take a job in a state where you are the only person in the whole state who does what you do, you develop a quick appreciation for the national network of professionals who do what you do in other states and the institutions that support the national network.

Most of my extension programs included some elements of analysis picked up from National Policy Conference presentations and expertise. My first topic was on taxes. Governmental finance was an area familiar to policy education professionals. In fact, the North Central policy educators had put out a regional publication during the previous decade on where taxes came from, how they were spent, and comparisons of various government finance and tax indicators across the states.

My first extension meeting in Harding County, South Dakota, was a memorable one. It was a meeting on taxes organized by the county agent in Buffalo, South Dakota. This is a sparsely populated county in the Northwest corner of the state where the stocking rates are more than 40 acres per cow. West River ranchers always said their reputation for hardy stock was because the cattle had to stay in a slow trot in order to find enough to eat.

Well, six people showed up for my first extension meeting. I had visions of a packed house and expressed a mild sense of disappointment to the county agent. He was smiling and had a sense of accomplishment on his face. So I asked him to explain it to me. He said he was very pleased with the turn-out. He also said that what you do not understand is that we go for quality out here. Quantity does not always matter. Those six people own half the county, and there is not anything that goes on in this territory that they do not know about. Well that certainly put a different spin on the meeting.

But it also became apparent to me that large audiences will not come to meetings in remote locations to hear about policy topics, unless the topic directly affects their pocketbook or unless the speaker was a real entertainer like my policy education mentor, Barry Flinchbaugh. In fact, most policy topics do affect the pocketbooks of the general population but usually in a way that is perceived to be indirect and less subject to personal control – unless you are one who happens to own half the county.

So I wondered if there was a more efficient way to provide policy education, particularly, if you accept the Jeffersonian model for building a strong democracy – a model in which educating the masses is as important as educating the elites. It was during this era that I learned that most people are not interested enough in most topics to go to a meeting, but they are typically interested enough to learn and read

about policy topics in the newspaper or a farm magazine. Integrating policy education into the preferred information venues continues to be a challenge as society increasingly uses the internet and becomes more familiar with events and happenings around the globe than they sometimes are about events a few blocks away in the same community.

Living the lesson, I started a weekly column series for local newspapers and farm magazines that was distributed by the University Extension Communications Service. One of the things I really liked about my position in South Dakota was that I could change topics periodically. New policy topics emerged with every legislative session. Among other topics, I was responsible for creating balanced voter information brochures on ballot initiatives. New issues regularly emerged and provided opportunities to clarify problems, outline alternatives, assess probable consequences, and outline tradeoffs.

A decade later, the habit of writing regular columns served me well in a different state and university position. After debating my old professor for a number of State Banking Association annual meetings, we were asked to co-author a regular column series for *Farm Journal* and *Farm Progress Publications* throughout the next decade. Periodically, I would often use bits of information and perceptions gleaned from the National Policy Conference presentations and network of policy educators. It has been about five years since I wrote the last column, but I still run into people who say, "Oh you are that straight guy who debates that other fella with a cigar in the farm magazine." I had a tendency to underrate the potential impact of this exposure, but the magazine with my last column was on the coffee table in the Governor's office. So while I may have only rarely gotten in to see the Governor, my columns made it in more regularly.

The five-years of experience in South Dakota during the 1980s farm finance crisis and the next five economic recovery years in Iowa set the stage for winning a National Distinguished Extension Program Award in 1992 and provided the next hard lesson learned that guided the rest of my professional career. South Dakota provided a lot of valuable experiences. The faculty were only one deep in every function, and there were few egos so everyone worked together as a team.

A colleague and I did a banker survey to assess the farm crisis, in part because we did not have enough funds or time to do a farmer survey, and we thought we would provide a better picture. The bankers also indicated that they preferred having the university extension service provide farm financial technical assistance over the state department of agriculture, which had hired some former experienced farmers to provide financial counseling. This information was used to convince administrators to let us organize a series of financial management meetings around the state.

We collaborated with extension specialists from agronomy, animal science, and engineering and with others from economics to organize a series of meetings around the state called, "Farm Finance Tips for Saving \$15,000." Nearly 100 to 350 farmers showed up to every meeting – a great outcome in a sparsely populated state. The first

part of the meeting focused on using financial statements to determine the farmer's current status; then we focused on farm enterprise management and marketing tips that when summed together would generate \$15,000 in savings for an average size farm. If the farmer was still losing ground and had already incorporated the best management practices, then the handwriting was on the wall, and it was time to begin thinking about repositioning or exit strategies.

Looking back, one has to believe that it was the right and proper role for the university's agricultural economics expertise to step forward and help the state's most severely stressed farmers during the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. However, not all agreed. It did not take long for the farm crisis in a rural state to show up in the form of a downturn in state budget revenues and spending, which translated into more cuts in the university budget. The Governor was disgruntled over the banker survey comments regarding his agriculture secretary's farm finance technical assistance program, so he slated the agriculture policy position for elimination. Wild Bill was the type of politician who very quickly concluded whether or not you were on his side. As far as he was concerned, there was little neutral ground for programs he did not sanction.

The story goes that the regents made the request to the new university president who refused to carry it out. He concluded it did not make sense to fire someone who just received two awards for organizing the research and extension programs in question. As a result, President H. Ray Hoops maintained his integrity and became the president with the shortest tenure in SDSU history. By that time I was headed out of state to a higher paying position at a bigger university. In a more recent decade, the former governor was eventually forced to resign from Congress to spend jail time for vehicular homicide while intoxicated. The one regret that I had was that I never had the opportunity to sit down and break bread with the governor to explain the purpose, objectives, and principles of policy education. Early on, I had asked the dean for permission to do so, but he said no.

The second half of this story occurred in Iowa. During the next five years, I worked with my new dean to attract a significant four-year Kellogg Foundation grant. We conducted a series of statewide satellite town meetings down-linked to 90 or more county extension offices. Every six months, the Citizens Advisory Board would select a new public policy topic on the state and local policy education agenda. The Public Policy Education Project (PPEP) worked to attract sponsorship of about 35 interest groups for each topic, pre-produce an educational video to clarify the issue and outline the major alternatives. The broadcast quality video would air during the first 30 minutes of the statewide satellite town meeting. The next 30 minutes featured a balanced set of expert panel members to respond to questions called in from the local audiences across the state. The final segment of each town meeting featured a locally facilitated small group discussion process and ended with participants registering their preferences on a survey for tabulation in a statewide report. The topics selected included the 1990 farm bill, Future Directions in Health Care,

Waste Management Policy, Drug Abuse Policy, the Future of Iowa Schools, and the State Deficit Crisis.

PPEP attracted about 1,500 to 3,000 local leader participants to each statewide town meeting and won the Distinguished Extension Program Award from the American Agricultural Economics Association in 1992. The methods were discussed at the National Policy Conference the following year. The hard lesson learned is that you can have the best program with the most impact that wins national awards, but the program may fail if the Kellogg funding runs out in the middle of a state budget crisis. No sour grapes here; universities sometimes work in a way that is oblivious to the sustainability of institutional innovations and enhanced outcomes. A note for next time: start laying the groundwork for sustainability much earlier in the project and hope that budgets are flexible when the soft money ends.

A Final Midcourse Adjustment for Sustainability

Soon after the PPEP-demise experience, I made a commitment to become more entrepreneurial. Farm Foundation and the National Policy Conference network provided me with an opportunity to serve as the lead on three major national policy education projects. During the 1990s, the economy was strong and growing rapidly, which showed up in the form of land use conflicts as demand for new housing, new businesses, new industry pushed cities outward. The project, "Land Use Conflict: When City and Country Clash," was an innovative partnership including Farm Foundation, Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Forum, and collaborating elements of the national extension network.

The success of the first collaboration led to a second project, "The New Science of Food: Facing up to Our Biotechnology Choices." Materials for these projects can be found on Farm Foundation's web site. These projects followed the entrepreneurial model emerging from universities where the rewards increasingly go to those who seek contracts and grants. The collaboration in these two projects provided sufficient resources for doing the work of the project, and subcontracts were let to a few people with expertise or specialized centers to complete the work of the project.

In contrast, I led a third National Project in the mid-1990s called the National Survey of State Animal Confinement Policies. This project followed the traditional model where colleagues from many states pledged and invested their personal staff time and resources to collaborate in generating a joint national project outcome. This project likely had greater educational outcomes because people in each state were invested in getting the research done and presenting the outcomes to home-state policymakers and clientele. Working together financially accomplished what no one individual state would accept in terms of costs for completing the national survey of states. However such projects are difficult to organize, manage, assure quality, and sustain funding. I still receive calls annually about whether the national survey has been updated, but no one individual or institution has attracted momen-

tum and resources to update the project. Why, because no one can afford to spend the time to organize a project on a *pro bono* basis unless the issue is of interest among policymakers and clientele demands a project.

The entrepreneurial center model will likely win out during the 21st century as long as policy educators are faculty are expected to compete with other faculty in terms of grants and contracts. Entrepreneurial faculty figure out quickly where the low hanging fruit are located in terms of sustainable incremental funds. Perhaps the advantage is in special purpose centers aligned with emerging agenda of federal and state policymakers or private sector endowment philanthropists. In recent years, many centers have emerged to focus on specialized issues areas including agricultural policy and trade, sustainable agriculture, water quality, biotechnology, renewable energy, food safety, food security, nutrition and obesity, entrepreneurship, innovation, and philanthropy to name a few. It is increasingly difficult for meagerly funded policy education generalists who hop from issue to issue every six months to compete effectively for university rewards and incentives and with education leaders aligned with an outreach function of a fully funded center.

During the past decade, I have been testing an alternative strategy for sustaining resources. If one cannot compete with a competing strategy, perhaps one can compete by adopting a similar center strategy. There is no preordained reason extension professionals cannot compete effectively in managing a university center. In fact, some of the oldest centers in the profession envisioned a strong extension component. An early extension policy education leader, J. Carroll Bottum from Purdue, spent time at Iowa State when the Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD) was initially established. In more recent years, the Agriculture and Food Policy Center at Texas A&M University was directed by extension policy economist Ron Knutson.

The basis for creation of the Community Vitality Center, the center for which I serve as the founding Director, came from three sources. During the 1990s, I had participated in the leadership of the emerging Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI). At that time, RUPRI was doing a number of innovative and productive projects and included representation from both research and extension. This institutional startup venture provided a useful experience for other home-state initiatives to come. It was also during this time that I came across a group of rural Iowa community leaders called Positively Iowa. They felt that agriculture and metropolitan centers represented the dominant political forces of the state. The economy helped those areas to recover from the farm finance crisis of the 1980s, but the network of 950 nonmetro communities in Iowa had not fully recovered and, from their point of view, were being left out. Similarly, I had observed the role that Farm Foundation played in supporting networks, organizing innovative projects, and stimulating dialogue over the years.

After a meager existence for nearly a decade, Positively Iowa developed the concept for a center to serve as a catalyst in identifying and promoting strategies for

enhancing community vitality. Enough political spadework was done to include the concept as a Governor's Strategic Planning Council recommendation. The concept was shopped around, and Senator Harkin sought congressionally directed appropriations to initiate and sustain the concept at about \$250,000 per year.

A planning group of rural leaders and university representatives developed a unique double bottom-line approach for institutional decision making. All policies and projects must meet concurrence of the governing board and university administration. The board included representatives from all higher education institutions and economic development agencies. In addition, a two-thirds voting majority came from community leaders representing diverse rural community interests – from mayors, county supervisors, business leaders, nonprofits, and farm bureau. This approach avoided previously experienced problems of agency dominance or administrator indifference.

During the five years that the center has been in operation, only three initiatives have been adopted: Community Entrepreneurship, Community Philanthropy, and Rural-Urban Policy Studies. Seed funding has been provided in collaborations with over 110 community leadership groups interested in entrepreneurial projects, over 110 community philanthropy groups, and a dozen policy studies ranging from wealth transfer, case studies of community entrepreneurship, and studies of new movers to identify actionable strategies for community leaders in retaining and attracting residents.

In a nutshell, the element missing from the PPEP project days of the early 1990s, has been organized and embodied in a board with motivated leaders who help sustain funding and create favorable dialogue about issue-oriented policy education projects with policymakers, interest groups, and university administrators. CVC does periodic newsletters to 2,500 state and local leaders and organizes educational academies in addition to all of the community demonstration, policy studies, and dialogue projects. In the future, policy educators who wish to be generalists will need to build institutions with capacity to sustain resources and support the breadth of the agenda envisioned. The final most critical component of the institutional innovation is a board of diverse leadership interests. Its members live the issues everyday; they see the consequences; they help design the research; they participate in the delivery; and they go to battle when needed to sustain the resources on campus or in the policy arena.

Concluding Observations

It is unfortunate that it took two-thirds of a professional career to figure it all out and put in place the institutional innovations necessary for a sustainable concept to work. I am at the tail end of the baby boom generation. Today, new university presidents are in their late 50s before they are hired. When I was a college student, it was common for university presidents to be hired in their early 40s. This

intergenerational comparison again provides a demographic indicator of the level of generational competition for resources, sophistication, and professional legitimacy. The good news is that after the baby boom generation comes the baby bust. Perhaps younger professionals will have greater opportunities and access to resources at a younger professional age in the future than that experienced by the current generation of policy educators.

Farm Foundation has made a monumental decision to discontinue support for the National Policy Conference in favor of creating a new Institute for Public Issues Education. While the concept represents a bold change for the future, the question remains whether or not the old model of *pro bono* collaboration that helped me throughout my career will be sufficiently competitive during the next century to attract and sustain the next generation of policy educators. Or alternatively would establishing an institute that includes a network of centers who wish to be aligned with Farm Foundation make a more competitive model in terms of providing professional homes and sustainable resources for a network with national capacity on a wide range of public policy education topics? Such fodder represents an important and useful discussion. Farm Foundation has invited such a discussion for input as the new institute structure takes shape. Those who have a stake or a legacy in this area, have a responsibility to participate. This is similar to the observation of a former city council member about the local policymaking process – “the rules will be made and influenced by those who show up.”

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