

HOW WSU's COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS PLANS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF AGRICULTURE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

by
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Introduction

It was stated about six years ago that only about a dozen major Colleges of Agriculture would exist in the United States by the early 21st Century. If that statement referred to Colleges containing the name "agriculture", the prediction may soon come to past. Across the nation, name changes have occurred, with the word "agriculture" being replaced by terms such as "Food Science" or "Food Systems". The reason for such taking on of new names relates to something even broader - an appeal to identify with a population several generations removed from agriculture. Objectives range from attracting more students to gaining legislative funding support for a set of disciplines that continue to become more distant from the average American who has taken for granted the process by which food is produced. Even many with roots in agriculture avoid recommending that their children seek careers in the agrarian-based disciplines.

Those whose livelihoods and professional careers exist for the purposes of teaching and advancing knowledge through research are keenly aware of these trends. College administrators who face the difficulties of securing financial support from state and federal legislatures dominated by urban representation have witnessed this trend to place agricultural issues on the back burner. Clearly, new approaches are needed for agriculture to compete for attention and resources in the current demographic climate.

In preparing this paper, I will discuss several factors that I consider critical for the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at WSU to serve agriculture in Washington State during the next two decades.

Vision

WSU must anticipate the future of agriculture. Current trends are indicative of greater future directions and we should be evaluating such trends and assessing their long-term impacts. Example: Collapse of the former USSR predicted the end of the cold war and forecast the reduction of federal funding for research and price supports for commodities such as wool. Example: Rapid technologies such as the desktop computer and satellite telecommunications systems predicted the shift to an expanding information era and the development of precision agriculture. Example: Global markets predict advantages to food production systems which minimize cost of production, processing, transportation and marketing while maintaining or increasing customer demands of cost, quality and availability of food.

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WSU must commit to preparing students to enter a global environment and encourage faculty to become global in their overall perspective.

Strategic Planning

In 1997, the College of Agriculture and Home Economics completed a 5-year strategic plan. Every department and unit participated with individual plans. These plans outline the direction for each unit by detailing areas of emphasis and a staffing plan to redirect resources to priority areas of program emphasis. These plans, while not etched in granite, provide the parameters for important decisions relative to areas of strength and areas that may be given up because of lower need in teaching, research or extension. This strategic planning has become an institutional norm that encourages forward thinking, continuous reassessment of mission, and planning for the future.

Reorganizing, Restructuring, and Redirecting Resources

An organization that remains unchanged is destined to become stagnant and eventually obsolete. Universities have not, for the most part, considered themselves obligated to change with the times as rapidly as businesses. Tradition "rules" and changes are generally resisted. Such organizations are often termed "entitled" versus "earning". This situation has caused universities to stand out from almost every other segment of society where reorganization, restructuring and redirection of essential resources have been required to return a profit to shareholders and maintain organizations in positions of competitiveness.

Universities are of course, different from businesses in that they depend heavily on tax derived public funding for much of their financial under-girding in the form of faculty and staff salaries, benefits, and their physical plant. At WSU, the College of Agriculture and Home Economics is one of eight colleges, but is unique in that it is fully engaged in all three missions of a Land Grant University - teaching, research and extension. Embedded in the Land Grant philosophy, WSU is committed to helping sustain and improve a productive agriculture. Through its system of extension offices in each of the state's 39 counties, research and extension centers placed in strategic locations around the state, three developing branch campuses, a growing network of learning centers, and a campus based faculty with joint appointments and statewide responsibilities, WSU is well positioned to serve the state's agricultural needs for the foreseeable future.

The College of Agriculture and Home Economics (CAHE), like other colleges within WSU has had to downsize and redirect resources for several years. Because of the focus on maintaining strong on-campus teaching, programs in agricultural research and cooperative extension have been the areas hardest hit by this process. During the past 5 years, CAHE has been forced to close out 35 faculty positions and numerous staff support positions to meet state-mandated cuts.

To retain the ability to serve agriculture with research and extension programs, CAHE has forged essential partnerships with the state's agricultural organizations and commodity commissions to establish a financial base of support.

During the past five years, the financial support provided to CAHE averaged \$4.1 million dollars annually, more than 5 times the national average for this source of funding. This amount contributed to the total grant support awarded to CAHE scientists of \$30 million last year - 40 percent of the total grants awarded to WSU. This partnership and support will play an important role in determining priorities for staffing and program direction as WSU continues to be shifted from a "state supported" to a "state assisted" institution.

The necessity to derive additional funding from research and educational partners will require a transformation in the manner by which CAHE will operate. The concepts of accountability and the ability to produce meaningful program impact will be strengthened at all levels of the organization. This will require that faculty engage in meaningful goal setting and reporting to those goals. This spirit of partnering and identifying anticipated impacts has been one of the major strengths for the Safe Food Initiative which seeks \$7.5 million from the Washington state legislature to be added on a biennial basis to WSU's base budget. This will provide permanent base funding for 20 research and extension faculty and an additional 20 research technicians along with \$1 million new funding for the Washington State Commission for Pesticide Registration. Another factor contributing to the success of this initiative to date has been the ability of agricultural interests across the state to rally together for this funding package. This type of collaboration should continue if agriculture is to be successful in securing additional funding in future legislatures.

Institutional Transformation

The next 10-20 years will most likely see dramatic changes in the manner by which universities operate. The trend is to become more business-like and changes will most likely follow those of industry in the 1990's. The concept of becoming customer oriented has been the driving force in developing distance education opportunities for place bound students. Universities have struggled to maintain enrollment numbers during the past five years of economic growth. Why should young people take on the debt of education when high paying jobs abound in a prosperous environment? Some education authors predict that student enrollments will only increase in a significant manner when the current economic boom gives way to economic downturn. It is in a more competitive economic climate when the value of an education becomes a deciding factor in acquiring employment.

Public resources, whether from local, state or federal sources, will most likely continue to diminish. Existing resources will be prioritized to the greatest needs of society. This is not good news for agricultural colleges in light of the continuing shift of population to urban areas where issues other than food and fiber production dominate the interests of the majority of voters. Agricultural colleges that depend heavily on public resources will struggle and, most likely, dwindle in size, ability and influence under this trend.

Becoming Customer and Issue Focused and Increasing Response Time

The rapidity that issues develop that impact agriculture demands that CAHE develop new approaches to be responsive and service the state's agricultural needs. Even now, a small administrative task force is exploring a number of approaches to enable CAHE faculty to engage in emerging issues with the best expertise available.

This will undoubtedly change the way such faculty would view their responsibilities and the manner in which financial support, evaluation and administration will be determined. High impact response teams will most likely be self-directed, issue-focused, and multidisciplinary.

As research continues to increase in complexity, the need for scientists across multiple disciplines to work together appears inevitable. Removal of barriers that stand in the way of multidisciplinary collaboration will become a high priority and will likely result in changes in how faculty are accommodated in facilities and units. Certainly, a greater flexibility in a number of areas will have to be addressed. These changes will present challenges to some and opportunities for others; but in the process, CAHE will become more responsive and accountable to agriculture in Washington State.

Attracting and Retaining High Quality People

During my first year and a half of association with WSU, I have been extremely impressed with the ability of CAHE to attract high quality faculty from both around the U.S. and abroad. There is also a cadre of high quality faculty and staff who have spent the major part of their careers at WSU. These are clear indicators that WSU projects an image of being a place of both quality and opportunity. These factors along with "Cougar Pride" become even more important as faculty and students are presented ever-increasing choices in where and how they choose to receive their education. Despite these positive aspects, this ability to attract and retain the best faculty is threatened by the fact that WSU salaries rank far behind peer institutions around the country. If current proposals to raise student tuition as means of improving these salaries is enacted, the quality of education must be evaluated against the costs and alternatives provided by other institutions. Such a measure will raise the bar of expected quality for all concerned.

Organizational leadership is also critical to provide the vision and direction that will position CAHE to best serve the diverse agriculture of Washington State. CAHE has an experienced group of administrators working closely with one another and with the central administration of WSU to build strength and quality throughout the college. Together with faculty department chairs and center directors, this administrative team is striving to maintain close contact with both faculty and the agricultural groups across the state to insure that issues are matched with adequate resources and personnel.

Maintaining and Improving Infrastructure

One of the real concerns throughout WSU is the condition of facilities. Funding has not kept pace with maintenance needs and many current facilities are overdue for modification and renewal. On the WSU campus, Johnson Hall houses over 230 faculty and staff in a structure that suffers functional obsolescence. A major renovation is planned during the next ten years, including an addition for plant biotechnology research. A new building to house the Departments of Apparel Merchandising/Interior Design and Landscape Architecture will enter the design phase later this year. Over 70 minor capitol projects have been identified with funds available to address only about a half dozen of the most critical needs. New property is being acquired at Mount Vernon and Wenatchee and relocation of some programs from the old 78th Street Station to the WSU Vancouver campus are being developed.

The issue of improved facilities will need to become a higher priority if CAHE is going to compete against other institutions around the country for quality personnel, students and programs.

Summary

In this paper, I have mentioned some of the key factors that will affect WSU's ability to serve agriculture during the next two decades. While these topics are important, they are not the complete list of factors. However, if the issues I have discussed are addressed, I have complete faith that agricultural interests in Washington State will be served very well by WSU.