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**PROCEEDINGS OF A SYMPOSIUM  
ON  
ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT  
OF AGRICULTURAL  
ECONOMICS PROGRAMS**



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APPROACHES TO REVIEWING PROGRAMS  
IN DEPARTMENTS OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

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My assignment is to discuss reviews of university agricultural economics departments--reviews that are planned and conducted by faculty and administrators with assistance from CSRS and outside panels of agricultural economists.

These reviews are not mandated by federal statutes and are not required by CSRS or anyone else in the federal bureaucracy. They are held at the request of the universities, and are based on the premise that departments wish to reexamine their programs from time to time with colleagues and get a panel's judgement on program directions and management. Reviews are useful if they help in setting future program directions, and especially if they bring about changes that contribute to more effective use of resources.

With a view toward improving the effectiveness of reviews and the efficiency of the resources invested in them, agricultural economists in CSRS have drafted guidelines for planning and conducting departmental reviews. The intention is to outline procedures that will be helpful to agricultural economics departments, college of agriculture administrators, panel members, and CSRS coordinators. The procedures finally published will leave room for considerable flexibility, and will be offered in the spirit of suggestions that may be useful, rather than rigid rules that must be followed.

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The guidelines draw heavily on recent review experience and on observations from panel members and agricultural economics department chairs. In late April/early May, drafts of the guidelines were reviewed by the chairman of the four regional associations of agricultural economics department chairs, former panel members, college of agriculture administrators, and others. The guidelines were revised on the basis of a number of useful criticisms and comments from those reviewers.

#### Approaches to Reviews

Over the years, universities and CSRS have tried a number of approaches to departmental reviews. Earlier types of reviews were held every year; later reviews were held every 2 or 3 years; now reviews are being scheduled only every 4 to 6 years, or whenever the universities feel a need for them.

Over the years, also, CSRS's objectives and emphases in departmental reviews has changed rather dramatically. Up to the late 1950s, the agency emphasized surveillance of research progress and financial accountability for the use of federal funds. This led to focus on individual research projects. During the 1960s and 70s, CSRS moved to analysis of agricultural economics work in broader program aggregates, and emphasis was on overall departmental performance, not that of individual faculty members or of individual projects. During the 1980s, the review emphasis of CSRS agricultural economics has moved toward overall departmental program analysis, management, and planning. With the decreased emphasis on



surveillance, the major thrust of the reviews is no longer to review the work of the past, but rather to help departments plan for the future.

Following are four approaches to departmental reviews and comment on university/CSRS experience with them.

1. Project reviews.

In project reviews, each faculty member reports on each of his or her projects, outlining objectives and methods, progress achieved during the previous period, and sometimes plans for the future.

Project reviews served their purpose in an era when CSRS emphasized surveillance and fiscal accountability. As an approach to overall departmental review, they outlived their usefulness long ago. Project-by-project reviews may be needed for micro management within an institution. CSRS considers project review the province of the universities, and suggests that such review be conducted without direct involvement of the CSRS faculty.

2. Comprehensive reviews.

Most agricultural economics departmental reviews in recent years have been comprehensive. Comprehensive reviews generally cover all departmental functions (teaching, research, extension, and international programs); all subject matter or program areas; and often departmental organization and management. The move to comprehensive reviews constituted a trend toward less emphasis on evaluation of individual projects and more emphasis on examining broader program areas.

Comprehensive reviews have served a useful purpose. They have the merit of examining the entire departmental program, and help focus



attention on the linkages among functions and programs. In many cases, however, they have concentrated on current and past activities with limited attention to planning for the future. With about 2 days to gather information in addition to that contained in the review document and a day to analyze all of the data and information, the panels often have difficulty in arriving at in-depth analyses and specific recommendations. Such reviews often turn out to be too general, too lacking in focus, have too little real commitment and involvement of the faculty, and particularly involve too little planning for the future to produce the greatest benefits for the department. They are most useful when they are provided a sharp focus, as may be done by identifying and addressing major issues or concerns faced by the department.

### 3. Future oriented reviews

Future oriented reviews focus on planning. They are concerned with the identification of emerging problems that will be most relevant for the department to be working on 3 to 5 and up to 10 years ahead. Their principal purpose is to assist the department and the institution in planning, assigning priorities, and allocating resources.

Faced with declining budgets, loss of positions, and heavy work loads, some department faculties feel they do not have time for planning. In other cases, they have become so discouraged by the decline in resources and lack of flexibility to make changes that they see little payoff from time invested in planning. A number of panels have noted the apparent lack of planning, and have urged the



departments to do more of it. In several cases the panels have pointed out that lack of planning leads to lack of focus in departmental programs and to a lack of identity for the department within the university or within the state, which in turn leads to a lack of support for agricultural economics work. In addition, some panels have pointed out that it is difficult for them to respond to specific questions when they have documentation on departmental resources, what the department of has done in the documentation on departmental resources, what the department has done in the past, and what it is currently doing, but not even a general outline of a plan for the future. So, in responding to specific questions, the panels have had to implicitly assume that the general strategy reflected in current programs will be continued--an assumption that may or may not be valid, and which in some cases may be dangerous. Panels often do not feel on solid ground in making specific recommendations under such circumstances.

At this point in history, it would appear that some additional attention to intermediate run strategic planning could be helpful to a number of agricultural economics departments in responding to:

1. Identifying issues critical to the state, changing needs of traditional users of agricultural economics outputs, and the needs of new audiences that are asking to be served.
2. Assisting on problems such as those related to financial stress in the agricultural industry, decline in the number of commercial farmers, and increase in number of part-time farmers; land,



water, and environmental problems; and financial and other problems of rural communities.

3. Coping with decline in the number of undergraduate and graduate students, and changing career orientations of many students.
4. Designing educational programs that take account of the increased sophistication of some extension audiences.
5. Responding to the increased relevance of international events, and in some instances, increased opportunities and demands for faculty involvement in international programs.
6. Responding to increased opportunities and demands for involvement in team, multidisciplinary, and problem-solving activities.
7. In some states operating with lower levels of public budgetary support, and in many states facing pressures for agricultural economists to obtain more grant and contract funds.

Faced with an environment such as this, the time when agricultural economics departments could simply hire good faculty and let them do what they want to do is a thing of the past in most states.

Reviews will be most useful to an agricultural economics department if they feed into ongoing departmental planning, and where possible, should be scheduled to coordinate with appropriate stages in the planning process. If the department does not have a continuing planning process underway, it may be useful to set a motion in preparation for the review.

An approach that has been used by some departments and which has proved to be effective is to carry out preliminary planning activities prior to the review. Some departments have done this preliminary planning in retreats off campus. In the process, they have developed tentative



plans and sometimes alternative plans, and the review was held before firm decisions and commitments were made. The review panels then were helpful in reacting to the plans developed by the faculty.

In an exhibit attached to the review guidelines, we have outlined a rather complete departmental planning process, much of which we borrowed from various agricultural economics departmental plans. Our objective is not to push a particularly planning process, as there is room for considerable variation in processes used by different departments and institutions. Further, if departments are not inclined to go through a complete formal planning process, we urge that they at least give some thought to key elements of planning such as missions, goals, needs of users, most effective use of resources, and payoffs from the use of resources.

#### 4. Issues oriented reviews

Over the years, programs, resources, and personnel in agricultural economics departments expanded substantially while panel size and the time allotted for reviews remained constant. This led some participants to the conviction that in order for reviews to be most effective, they had to be given greater focus. One of the ways greater focus was achieved was to concentrate on issues identified by the institution. This has been done in a number of comprehensive and future oriented reviews.

In a very few recent cases, institutions have experimented with reviews that are built entirely around issues. While the breadth of coverage has been narrower than in other reviews, these reviews have had sharp focus and appear to have had considerable impact.



Reviews that are strictly issue oriented can be appropriate and productive, especially in large departments, where there are major concerns that must be faced, or when the time available for planning and conducting reviews is limited. In such reviews, the panels should not be asked to respond to 50 or 100 questions, but rather asked to address 10 to 20 major issues that are well thought out.

#### Concluding Comments

While we admittedly discourage project reviews and encourage future oriented reviews, we have not tried to specify the approach that all universities should follow in conducting departmental reviews.

Reviews are conducted by and for the benefit of the institutions, so they should select the approach that best fits their needs, interests, and preferences. Activities related to planning the review may suggest the best solution in some cases. Some departments believe that for either a future or an issue oriented review to be effective, the background of a comprehensive review is needed to provide perspective on future oriented review, issues or problems may emerge; thus, an issue orientation can become a subpart of comprehensive or future oriented reviews.

Regardless of the approach selected, three things should be kept in mind in planning and conducting departmental reviews:

1. The need to provide focus and have clearly stated objectives for the review.
2. The value of putting emphasis on broader program areas to avoid getting bogged down on the details of individual projects.



3. The main purpose of the review is to help the department plan for the future so the review should be forward looking.

Most departmental reviews would be improved if, in addition to information on inputs, departments would provide more information on outputs, productivity, and impacts of programs on the audiences the department serves.

Data from information systems now under development may be useful to departments in preparing for reviews in the relatively near future. From AERIS (Agricultural Economics Research Information System) being developed in the Agricultural Economics Section of CSRS, the agency should be able to provide information on research inputs for administrative units by sources of funds. A computerized information system for departmental decision making in the North Central region is being developed at North Dakota State University with assistance from CSRS. When fully developed, it is anticipated that this system will be put in use in the North Central and the other three regions. It would provide data on the extension and teaching functions as well as research. These data could be useful in preparing review documents and in planning and conducting reviews. They could be especially useful in comparing a department with other agricultural economic departments on a few key variables, especially in the same region. The data could also be useful in analyzing departmental programs, in planning, and in day-to-day management of departments.<sup>2</sup>

To assist departments in their reviews, CSRS could consider developing a data base of a few key variables (such as inputs and professional

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<sup>2</sup>These systems are outlined in Proceedings of a Workshop on Agricultural Economics Program Analysis, sponsored by the Cooperative State Research Service, USDA, East Lansing, MI, August 5, 1987.



publication in total and per faculty in research, extension, and teaching) that could be used for comparisons across departments. If each review included such information in uniform data sets and formats it would not take long build a data base that would bring more analytical content to agricultural economics reviews. In preparation for a review, a department could ask CSRS for data on six or eight other departments it wanted to compare itself with.