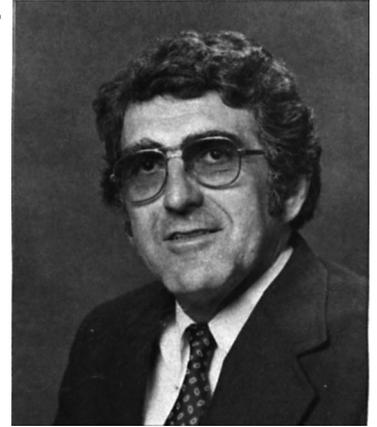


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The collaborative role of research and extension

During a visit to the Soviet Union a couple of years ago, I became involved in a discussion of the comparative strengths and weaknesses of American and Soviet agricultural science. I was convinced again that the Soviet Union has a sophisticated and outstanding collection of scientists doing research on agriculturally related subjects. But the Soviet Union, then and now, continues to have a problem with productivity that, even considering the harsh and variable climatic conditions, seems unusually poor.

One might ask, "If they have the agricultural technology, natural resources, and agricultural system, what then is the problem?"

None of the deputy ministers I met with had ever heard of Cooperative Extension or Agricultural Extension; nor had they heard of the concept. They were fascinated, and I found myself spending most of the rest of the trip explaining the idea to the various committees we met with.

Egypt is another country with highly qualified scientists but severe agricultural productivity problems. It, too, lacks the linkage between the scientist and grower. And so the story goes over many nations of the world, but not in the United States, where those responsible for shaping our agricultural system recognized the importance of translating scientific research into a form usable by lay people. As a result, agricultural science, agricultural extension, and the agricultural industry have combined in a symbiotic relationship to make the United States the greatest food-producing country the world has ever known.

The adoption of a new farming technique is no trivial matter. Even the strongest arguments for a change in a production system can easily be ignored, because in any change the risk of lost income, lost credit, lost production is just too great. If a farmer had to glean the scientific literature and decide individually what changes could be made, you can bet that the agricultural technology of this country would come much closer to that of the rest of the world. We would not be exporting food; we would be looking for some place to buy it ourselves.

Our farm population has shrunk to something less than three percent of the population of the United States. The job of producing food has become more critical than ever. Pests that threaten crops seem to be increasingly severe. Large agricultural enterprises of a monoculture nature make any

break in the system potentially devastating. The social, political, and legal battles that face every farm manager leave little time for horticultural, agronomic, and entomological considerations.

Agricultural research and extension face unusual demands for new technology that will improve efficiency, for new technology that will reduce environmental pollution and increase productivity so we can ship produce to other lands. The Experiment Station depends upon Extension to help identify problems, to assist in the design and conduct of field experiments, and to help convert data into lay terms.

Cooperative Extension is in a pivotal position. And yet an incredible thing seems to be happening to this organization. People keep asking, "What do they do?" and "Why are they needed?"

Cooperative Extension is accused of being obsolete. Some critics say the farm population is now so small, Extension is no longer needed. Others condemn Extension for serving too broad a population. Still others criticize it because it helps only production agriculture.

Maybe Extension has been too successful. Perhaps in some instances it has been too independent, too separate from the Experiment Station. Perhaps in some cases it has become too closely aligned with the agricultural industry and has forgotten its University base. One of the problems in the constant battle for recognition and understanding could lie in the name itself — "Cooperative Extension" — an abstract term that does not identify what the organization does as clearly as did "Agricultural Extension."

Knowledge is not developed to be published and put on a library shelf. The Land Grant concept provides for a system of interpreting, demonstrating, and implementing agricultural knowledge, through extension.

It is time to reaffirm the collaborative role of research and extension, to unify the extension of state and federal research, and to coordinate planning for research and extension at the federal level.

As we approach a new century with increased demands for new agricultural technology, research and extension need to be recognized as a partnership working for a common goal, as envisioned by those who had the foresight to provide for this unique system.