Mid-Cycle Update Report to the 2008 Academic Review

Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
The University of Tennessee
December, 2013

A departmental review was conducted on October 27-29, 2008. The review committee made 15 suggestions based on the review. Below are the 15 suggestions, followed with a departmental response filed shortly after the review was conducted. Following each of the original responses is the departmental update report.

1) The department needs to focus greater attention on recruiting, particularly minority students.

The department is committed to increasing undergraduate enrollment. Our strategic plan sets a goal of between 100 and 120 students by the 2011-2012 academic year. Recruiting efforts, in coordination with CASNR, have been and will continue to be made. The departmental web site was redone in 2008, and provides a much improved link to our academic programs. Our new undergraduate majors may be more attractive to minority students, compared to our traditional ag economics major. While new brochures can be a help in recruiting, there is likely to be more of an impact with today's incoming freshmen using an electronic medium. The departmental undergraduate committee will develop and implement a recruitment update plan by August, 2009.

Update, December 2013:

Our undergraduate student numbers have continued to grow, but not to the level we had hoped. From 2008's enrollment of 71 undergraduates, we increased to 86 for the 2011/12 academic year. Degrees awarded increased from 22 in 2007/08 (15 B.S. and 7 M.S.) to 42 in 2011/12 (28 B.S. and 14 M.S.). So we have seen modest growth in both undergraduate and graduate student numbers. We continue to make changes in our recruiting methods. Our new web site is now 5 years old, so we have another update planned in 2014. We have also added Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn departmental sites to help attract students and maintain relationships with alumni.

2) All future faculty hires should be split appointments.

There is a trend in land grant systems to assign beginning faculty joint academic appointments. Historically, joint appointments were common for research and teaching, and it is becoming more commonplace to define research/Extension joint appointments. While there is good reason for some appointments to contain both Extension and research elements, there is also good reason for some appointments to be entirely research, Extension, or teaching. The department would wish to maintain the flexibility to design appointments to answer the needs of the research, Extension, and teaching programs. Any appointment should recognize program need and the probationary requirements for promotion and tenure.

Update, December 2013:

Since 2008, we have filled 7 faculty positions. Two of those positions are Research Assistant Professors on soft money appointments. Both of the positions are total research appointments, one at 75% and one at 100%. We have filled four tenure-track positions since 2008. Three of those four positions are 100% Extension appointments, and one is 75% Research/25% Teaching. While we acknowledge the 2008 report's suggestion for more split appointments, our departmental needs for the positions we filled defined their appointments. Our FTE in Extension faculty, for example, had dropped from 11 to .25 since 2000. We felt it imperative, both from a resource support and from a promotion/tenure standpoint to define the positions as we did. We currently have two faculty positions which have been approved to fill. One is the Greever Chair, which due to the endowment funding source is defined as 100% Extension. The other position is a Livestock Economist position, which is advertised as 75%R/25%T. The department will likely be approved to fill at least 3 faculty positions in 2014. Past funding sources for these three positions would allow for 1.9 FTE in Teaching; .1 FTE in Research; and 1.0 FTE in Extension. Through possible retirements, there could be additional faculty positions to fill in 2014. This presents the department with challenges and opportunities, as there could be up to a third of the faculty next year with less than three years' experience.

3) The department should offer an EXCEL course to teach financial and logical functions.

Computer skills are a necessary element for college graduates to be competitive in securing employment. Incoming freshmen have a wide array of computer skills, with word processing and internet expertise being most common. Some undergraduates easily learn software used in class, while others may be challenged. It has been the practice for each course to independently teach software use on an as needed basis. This method has been used because computer skills are often lost quickly if not used consistently. A separate course may be helpful, but the software learned may not be used for at least a semester, at which time "re-learning" would be necessary. For that reason, the department has not seen the need for a separate course in software education. The undergraduate committee will discuss the need for a possible one hour course. It would likely draw students from many departments, and should be considered on an institute level also.

Update, December 2013:

As of 2013, the department has not added this course. There are several departmental undergraduate classes which utilize a computer lab where EXCEL is taught and used. In exit interviews with graduating seniors, this course has never been suggested in the past five years.

4) The department should increase the number of undergraduates participating in study abroad programs.

The department will continue to encourage undergraduates to participate in study abroad programs. The department is blessed with faculty members who have ties, either professionally or personally, with many foreign countries. With additional funding, more opportunities or support for these programs can be advanced.

Update, December 2013:

The constraint to more encouragement is basically funding. The department helped to fund ($1,000) an undergraduate summer study abroad program in 2013. While there is anecdotal testimony of how these programs enhance the students' resumes, the number one priority for undergraduates remains effective classroom teaching. With more financial resources, more undergraduates would likely choose foreign study opportunities. While there are some college/university funds available, much of the finances are up to the student to provide. Many students would prefer to join domestic internship programs, which pay students and allow them professional contacts for future job placement.

5) Teaching ratings don't coincide with students' comments.

Exit interviews with graduates would place our teaching component well above university standards, so the data are surprising. The undergraduate and graduate committees will continue to analyze data regarding teaching evaluations.

Update, December 2013:

We have conducted both graduate and undergraduate student exit interviews. There has been one additional case where ratings and student comments don't coincide, but we are continuing to study that case. We are also hampered by a recent change to an all-volunteer student evaluation system. The new system vastly reduces the unbiased element of the student evaluations. Therefore, it is difficult to assign much credibility when such low response data area coming for the courses. The department head visits classes near the end of the semester, with the instructor not present. These visits, along with the exit interviews, have helped in providing additional data to the evaluation process.

6) The department should collect better information on job placement and alumni contacts.

Conducting exit interviews with graduating students is one method of finding out where our students are going to work. As important, however, is keeping up with them after a few years. Keeping our departmental newsletter mailing list current will help to keep in contact with graduates. Establishing a departmental advocacy/advisory council will also help.

Update, December 2013:

Two additional resources have been added to the department to help answer this request. First, we have added a grad student data collection system which has allowed us to keep better track of our graduates. Secondly, we have a departmental LinkedIn presence, which help us to keep in touch with alumni. Our departmental newsletter continues to be a source of contact for our alumni. However, in 2014 we plan to go to an on-line distribution method for our newsletter. We have been reluctant in the past to switch completely to an on-line system, as we feared cutting off ties to some of our alumni. With continued access to on-line technology, however, it is time to change. It may reduce our contacts, but we will be able to better serve our alumni and friends via an on-line system, where we can have more timely updates and expand our current newsletter format.

7) The department should pursue collaboration with the Department of Economics in establishing a PhD program.

That very suggestion is included in the department's strategic plan. If the Department of Economics is willing to establish a joint program, there is a possibility that a PhD program can be reinstituted. Funding issues would also have to be addressed in order to attract the quality and quantity of PhD students desired. The departmental graduate committee will approach the Department of Economics by the summer of 2009 to investigate the possibility of a joint PhD program.

Update, December 2013:

Our graduate committee met with and worked out the details for a joint PhD program with the Department of Economics in 2009. While the program is still officially on the books we have had no students enroll in the program. Lack of funding/resources is the main reason for the lack of response. However, there is continued interest in our joint PhD program with the Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries (FWF). Currently (Fall, 2013) there are four PhD students enrolled in the Natural Resource Economics program in FWF. There are likely just too many constraints at this time to develop a strong link with the Department of Economics PhD program. Those constraints are simply a lack of resources to fund the teaching/research components of a PhD program. If our department is to have a PhD program, it will have to be based on additional FTEs and funding for assistantships.

8) Faculty incentive programs, tied to grants and contracts, should be reviewed.

For several years F&A returns to grants and contracts have come back to the department. This practice may impact the incentive of faculty members to seek extramural funding, especially if that funding helps support graduate student stipends, travel expenses, or other expenses. The department has fixed costs that must be met, however, particularly with decreasing support for travel and supplies from traditional sources. Other avenues of support and incentives for those faculty receiving F&A funds will be considered.

Update, December 2013:

The department has made changes to allow 25% of F&A funds to go back to the PI. These funds are at the discretion of the PI to fund research or teaching projects within the department. Over the past few years, PIs have used this program to fund travel, hardware and software purchases, and other supply support.

9) The department needs to go beyond the traditional definition of Extension and embrace the modern broader vision of Extension.

The traditional definition of Extension for a land grant university is extending the research component beyond the campus to the general public. Just as Extension specialists conduct applied research, research scientists contribute to extending research findings to the general public. This is the strength of our department – working jointly on projects for the betterment of all. The most recent federal funding opportunities recognize the importance of teamwork by combining research and Extension efforts. On the departmental level, the best way to engender this type of efficiency is by hiring the right people and providing incentives. The department already has the quality faculty needed, and incentives will come through annual evaluations. The head will work with institute personnel to assure that faculty members receive recognition for multidisciplinary work.

Update, December 2013:

The department has 3.25 Extension FTEs, with three 100% Extension faculty and one 75R/25E faculty position. The three 100% E positions have all been hired since May, 2012. The department has by and large always been involved with applied research. Our newest faculty members are in the process of developing their own Extension educational program. That process is the number one priority for them currently. However, there is a greater expectation and opportunity for collaboration than there has been in the past. As our newest faculty members build their educational programs, there will be opportunities to collaborate with their R/T colleagues, both inside and outside the department. Currently, our Extension faculty members are working with the Research Dean and Experiment Station Directors to formulate a livestock funding model for the beef herds owned by UT Ag Research. This will lead to future collaborations within the institute.

10) Define and re-advertise the endowed chair position.

With institute approval, a faculty search committee will be formed in 2009 to define and advertise this important position.

Update, December 2013:

Since 2003, the search was dropped, and then restarted to fill the Greever endowed chair position. The challenge has been a difference of opinion between how the department defined the wishes of the donors combined with the need of the department, and the vision of the position by an outside administrator. We were able to hold out to make sure the wishes of the donors were met. The process was delayed much too long, but the delay was considered vital to having a successful faculty member sitting in the chair position and to having met the desires of the donors. The most recent search has yielded four strong candidates who will interview for the position in the fall of 2013.

11) The department head meets with non-tenured faculty quarterly and unless there is a problem, this is too frequent.

The strategic plan called for instituting these quarterly meetings. It is the department's opinion that these meetings, while frequent, are held to ensure there are no problems.

Update, December 2013:

Since our review, the department head has continued to meet with junior faculty on a regular basis, sometimes quarterly as necessary. While it may be a point to reconsider at the next strategic planning workshop (2014), this point may be misunderstood. These meetings need not be "formal" in the sense of detailed reporting by the faculty member and evaluating by the department head. Rather they have been a way to make sure junior faculty members are on-track in an informal but instructive atmosphere. Generally two of these are meetings are with mentors included, but others have been in the process of annual evaluations or other less-formal meetings. The department head should likely not be constrained either way – with regimented and mandatory quarterly, or with a limited number of meeting opportunities. The best likely scenario is for flexibility and meetings on an as-needed basis.

12) The department needs to enhance collaboration with other units within and beyond the institute.

The recent joint effort by research and Extension, on the institute level, in developing and writing grant proposals via the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative was well supported by the department. We will continue to look for ways of collaborating with other units to enhance our research and outreach accomplishments.

Update, December 2013:

We have increased our collaboration with other units since 2008. We have added two adjunct faculty members, one at the Oak Ridge National Lab (ORNL), and one at Pellissippi State University (PSU). We have had limited collaboration with the ORNL adjunct faculty member, but have had a joint project and grant proposal collaboration with the adjunct from PSU in 2013. Two of our newer faculty members have participated in the Institute's Faculty Scholar program. In this program newer faculty members are

enrolled in a 12- month program where they meet and work with newer faculty from other departments. Some travel is involved, and all participants are expected to be a Pi or Co-Pi on a research grant proposal by the end of the program. We will continue to send newer faculty through this program.

13) The department should create an external advisory group.

In 2009, a faculty committee will be formed to develop guidelines for establishing an advisory/advocacy group. Some groundwork was laid in 2008 with an alumni survey. Data from that survey along with other input from faculty and supporters will be used to develop this group.

Update, December 2013:

So, far the department has not established an outside advisory group. This responsibility falls mainly on the department head. There was an initial survey conducted with faculty to determine who would be appropriate to sit on such an advisory group. By January, 2014, the current department head will be relieved of serving as department head for the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications Department. This should free up adequate time to reconsider forming an advisory group. It will also be an agenda item for the department's 2014 strategic planning workshop.

14) The department should place more value on international activities.

With increased funding, more international activities can be made available to faculty and students. During 2008, several faculty members were a part of international research/educational events. One graduate student traveled overseas in the summer of 2008. These international opportunities should fall within the job expectations of the institute, department, and individual faculty member.

Update, December 2013:

In the past five years, we have had several international activities by both faculty and graduate students. Graduate students have, through research programs, visited Southeast Asia and Africa. Faculty members have visited Africa, Europe, and China. Two of our faculty members have served on three separate sabbatical development leaves to South Korea; Geneva, Switzerland (United Nations Conference for Trade and Development ; and The Hague, Netherland (LEI Institute for Economic Research).

15) The department should do a better job of promoting its successes.

During 2008, the departmental awards committee along with individual faculty members developed several award packets. Faculty awards included two institute research awards and one teaching award. An extension associate and an area specialist each won state-wide award of excellence competitions. The department will continue to nominate faculty and staff for awards.

Update, December 2013:

The department has had several faculty, staff, and student awards over the past 5 years. Some of these awards include:

- UT Alumni Outstanding Teacher (2013)
- Extension Award for Innovative Programming (2013)
- Gamma Sigma Delta Team Award (2013, shared by 12 faculty members)
- Graduate Student Outstanding M.S. Thesis Award (2012)
- Epsilon Sigma Phi Mid-Career Award (2012)
- Gamma Sigma Delta Team Award (2012, shared by 8 faculty members)
- Co-operative Research Program Fellowship (2011)
- Cavender Award for Best Extension Publication (2011)
- Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Fellowship (2011)
- Governor's Environmental Stewardship Award for Excellence (2011)
- Dickson Extension Award for Innovative Programming (2011)
- Tennessee State Sheep Expo Service Award (2011)
- NFU Award for Outstanding Service to American and World Agriculture (2010)
- Lincoln Institute Fellowship (2010)
- College Lidvall Outstanding Teacher Award (2010)
- Extension Early Career Award (2010)
- UT Research Impact Award (2010)
- American Association of Retirement Communities Academic Research Award (2009)
- USDA-ERS Helios Award for Outstanding Research (2009)
- Agricultural Products Suppliers Association of Mexico Outstanding Participation Award (2009)
- Kansas Farmers Union Ruth Hirsh Award (2009)
- International Association of Agricultural Economists Travel Award (2009)
- Farm Foundation Winning Essay (2009)
- Gamma Sigma Delta Excellence in Research Award (2008)
- Gamma Sigma Delta Excellence in Teaching Award (2008)
- Extension Hicks Award of Excellence (2008)
- Gamma Sigma Delta Service Award of Merit (2008)
- UT Ag Research Distinguished Young Scientist Award (2008)

Funds have been established to enhance our award and alumni presence. Plans are to begin an annual awards, alumni, and scholarship banquet in spring, 2014. This will give the department more visibility and give the opportunity to invite alumni to campus.