

Field Notes: A Topographical Survey of Our Professional Society

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Field notes are an important part of any engineering process. As a youth, I grew up running terrace lines and assisting with a family land improvement contracting business. I would like to review the basic principles of surveying and transfer these principles to our professional society, The American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE).

Before a topographic survey is started, it is appropriate to note the environmental conditions of the day. A bench mark must be located. The initial readings must be taken from the bench mark as backsights. Foresights are taken on unknown elevations and occasionally a turning point is needed to complete the survey process. I hope this analogy will be beneficial as we think about our future and the implications for our professional society.

Making sense of change

Many futurists have noted that we are living in a rapidly changing environment filled with chaos and ambiguity. As surveyors begin a set of field notes they record temperature, wind, and other changing field conditions which affect the accuracy or interpretation of the information. As educators, we should constantly record the changing conditions in consumer expectations, environmental concerns, structure of agriculture, global economic and political forces, availability of funds, population demographics, and the functions of agricultural education in an information driven society. Each of the variables in our environmental scan affect what we do and how we interpret our findings.

Bench marks are permanently established reference points of known elevation. As a professional society, we have established two principal bench marks. The Journal of Agricultural Education is a publication which continues to improve. To demonstrate the qualitative and quantitative changes, compare Volume 1 (1961) to Volume 34 (1993). Comparatively our

professional journal is very young. The National Agricultural Education Research Meeting is a second bench mark. Again, when you compare the proceedings from 1974 to 1993, it is easy to measure significant growth. As a professional society, we should return to these bench marks on a regular basis. They serve to validate our progress and help us measure what is important.

Moving from the known to the unknown

Backsights are survey readings taken from a known elevation and are added to establish the height of instrument. Thus, it is from backsights that we establish our vision for the future. Three recent backsights were useful as I prepared my field notes. In April 1992, I was proud to represent the 308 members of AAAE at the Spring symposium of the National Academy of Sciences Board on Agriculture. There were representatives of fifty professional scientific societies who assembled at the Beckman Center on the University of California-Irvine campus. The goal was to enhance the future of the land grant system. However, one of the major outcomes was to establish a dialogue among representatives of professional societies. This dialogue provided a better understanding of how academic disciplines and professional societies combine to address the environmental and social issues related to agriculture and food systems.

I was struck with the diversity and the size of membership in these societies. Dr. Gale Buchanan represented over 4,000 individual members and 30 professional societies who are members of the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST). Dr. Robert Zimbelman represented over 12,000 members of the Federation of American Societies of Food Animal Sciences (FESFES). FESFES is a coalition of professional societies of the animal, dairy, poultry and meat sciences. I was impressed by the high expectations of the AAAE as a contributor in the futuring and technology transfer processes. More recently, that expectation was reinforced by the

implications for agricultural education in the Chancellor's Review of the Texas A&M Agriculture Program (1992) and the Texas Agricultural Summit (1993). It is clear that there are high expectations for agricultural education by colleagues and that AAAE can serve as an important catalyst for education in and about agriculture.

The second backsight was the result of an opportunity to represent AAAE during the meeting of the Joint Boards of Agricultural Education on July 15-20, 1992 in Alexandria, Virginia. As an initial activity, some 60 people were individually asked to identify three issues which face agricultural education. Each table of eight people then sorted the issues into priorities. Over 100 issues emerged as important to the group; certainly too many to be managed by a small group with limited resources. During the recent Texas Agricultural Summit, some 425 agricultural leaders converged the issues of the agricultural industry into thirty-nine and then reduced them to ten. Examples of the ten included: 1) resolving conflicts related to environmental and natural resource concerns, 2) determining the appropriate goals and methods to educate the public and children about agriculture, and 3) asserting leadership in coalition building with various interest groups (Nelson, 1993). I am convinced that these key issues will provide focus as we seek solutions for the agricultural industry.

The third backsight was provided by the results of a Delphi inquiry by Phil Buriak and me. Deans and Directors of thirty-five top research institutions, which provided agricultural education as part of their program, were asked to identify strengths and limitations of agricultural education research. They were convinced that, as a discipline, our research lacked focus and dedicated time. Bob Warmbrod has continually challenged us to improve the identification of research issues worthy of inquiry.

Probing our future

Foresights are topographical survey readings taken on unknown elevations. Foresights are the only way a surveyor can determine the unknown. I contend this is the only way we, as a professional society, can identify trends and discover new knowledge and relationships.

Strategic planning should be our first series of foresights. We must continue to redefine our strategic plan and make it the working document for our professional society. Together, we must discuss and communicate our collective vision. Who are we? What are our values and beliefs? What is our organizational culture and our assumptions? What are the issues which should focus our research? The 6th Century B.C. inscription on the temple to Apollo at Delphi is good advice for our society; "know thyself."

The primary roles of the professional society are to provide an open forum to encourage inquiry and collaboration, to share new knowledge and to foster coalitions. Collectively, we must clearly communicate who we are. I would argue that agricultural education is a set of disciplines working at the interface of human performance, food systems, and natural resource stewardship. It is essential we recognize the changes which are occurring in agricultural education. There has been a recent shift in the philosophical and theoretical framework of our programs. Barker (1992) discussed the consequences of failing to recognize fundamental changes which define the boundaries and the behaviors in order to be successful. The dramatic changes occurring in our work have the same implications for agricultural education that electronic quartz watch technology had for Switzerland.

Collaboration is the second series of foresights. It is essential we work together, especially in intellectual endeavors addressing key issues. There has been a revolution in the way work is done in many American corporations. While this revolution has been slow to reach the university, most experts agree that the shift to self-directed work groups will continue. To work together, each member must know himself/herself, where he/she is going and be willing to communicate his beliefs and values to the work group. AAAE initiated six work groups as a part of the annual plan of work. Each of these work groups was charged with one major issue identified through a Delphi inquiry among selected members of the professional society. Our work groups have had success, but progress has been slow and sometimes frustrating. I applaud the efforts of each of the six as we learn how to better use work group methods.

Fisher (1992) warned of the trap associated with emphasizing structure over the process of empowerment of the work group. Empowerment is a function of authority, resources, information, and accountability. Fisher argues that in this equation there is no empowerment if any of the four variables go to zero. In retrospect, our AAAE work groups were not empowered to complete their work. They had little authority and no resources assigned to their job.

How can work groups realize their potential? First, we recognize that research is a creative process and is more successful when it occurs in an interactive environment. Baker (1994) identified five key networking principles: 1) relationships are a fundamental human need; 2) people tend to do what is expected of them; 3) people tend to associate with people like themselves; 4) repeated interaction encourages cooperation; and 5) it's a small world with many shared acquaintances. Work groups should be small enough to encourage active participation but large enough to provide diversity. The membership must be voluntary and each member must fit into the dynamics of the group. Based on the strategic plan, priority issues must be addressed. The membership of the AAAE with its limited resources mandates collaboration.

Today's electronic communication systems offer a valuable resource available to every collaborative work group. The Internet system and client/server applications, such as Gopher, provide opportunities to access and share information world-wide with small direct costs. Baker (1994) examined strategies to foster intelligence networks. He recognized the value of computer technologies and the serious limitations of the system. "Despite great advantages, electronic communications cannot become the cornerstone of your independent intelligence system" (p. 59). Baker concluded that electronic mail is efficient for communications of well-defined contexts such as coordination of efforts and exchanging of facts. However, Baker argued that face-to-face interactions should be used for the discussion of problems and solutions, building a shared understanding, discussing changing priorities and the socialization of members. The interactions of this annual AAAE meeting should foster collaboration and the development of a research framework.

Coalitions make up the third series of foresights. As a temporary alliance of distinct parties for joint action, coalitions should occur both within the agricultural education community as well as with external groups. There are many benefits from a planned and communicated coalition. The extension of financial, political and intellectual resources are obvious advantages. In a coalition, each of the affiliates has a distinct client base and a unique set of priority issues. Like many companies, there are commonalties among the clients. However, each affiliate must continue to focus on its primary mission and, at the same time create synergy within the coalition.

The Council for Agricultural Education is an example of an internal coalition of AAAE, NASAE, and NVATA. Although recently beset with fiscal and philosophical disorder, The Council has accomplished much and continues to have great potential. The recent coalition between AAAE and 29 other professional societies through CAST has tremendous capacity for success. The AVA coalition involving the Agricultural Education Division and other vocational groups is a potentially powerful coalition which suffers from inertia.

As with any partnership, it is essential that clear goals and effective communications exist. Each coalition should have an understood memorandum of agreement describing authority, resources, information, and accountability. As a part of the agreement, broad issues must be identified. We should recognize that collectively we will not have the same position on each issue. Thus it is permissible, in fact essential, that we may join, separate and rejoin coalitions as the issues change. The AAAE must empower the Executive Committee to make spot decisions representing our professional society.

Moving our frame of reference

The turning point is the last technique in our topographical survey. As a temporarily established reference point, the turning point is used as an intermediate step in moving into the future. We have access to tremendous amounts of bench mark information. However, information is not knowledge. We have an important role in helping to transform information into knowledge. Knowledge, like backsights, is not power. Rather knowledge is the potential for power when it is

correctly applied to an issue. As a professional society, we have a major role in the application of knowledge to agricultural issues.

Postman (1992) concluded that John Dewey's aim was to help the learner function in a world of constant change and puzzling ambiguities. We can surely agree that things have changed. Covey (1991, 141) reminds us . . . "that we should never get so busy sawing that we don't take time to sharpen our saw." Rapid change demands a larger investment in research and development if our profession is to enhance human performance. To optimize our success, it is essential that AAAE collectively anticipate changes as they occur in our environment, challenge old dogma, network the talents of its members, and draw on creativity and imagination for solutions. Together we can achieve greater success as we re-engineer our future.

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