

2015 Agricultural Economics Implementation Plan Report

Many of the 50 recommendations contained in the Agricultural Economics 2011 Periodic Review involved one-time events, or are part of ongoing activities, so the eight most important goals were selected for reporting.

1. Maintain a strong department seminar series to enhance all mission areas.

Assessment method

We maintain a spreadsheet including dates, speaker name and host, speaker affiliation, and topic. Goals are to have an appropriate frequency of seminars, a productive blend of external and internal speakers, and adequate coverage of mission areas and sub-fields within the discipline.

Results

In the 2014-15 academic year, 26 seminars were held. Nine featured internal speakers, and 17 were from outside UK. In the previous 2013-14 academic year, there were 21 seminars, 15 of which involved speakers from outside UK. In 2014-15 the coordinators were Shaheer Burney and Mike Reed. The coordinators' role is to solicit seminar invitations and to manage seminar logistics. All funded graduate students are required to attend seminars, and other students and faculty are encouraged to attend. The coordinators are given a \$3,000 per year budget.

Analysis of results and reflection

The series is meeting our needs, with appropriate frequency mix of external and internal speakers, and mix of topics. Success depends on how active the coordinators are in soliciting speaker ideas. Areas for improvement remain: (a) Increase faculty attendance – often only 3-6 faculty members attend, (b) Include more extension-oriented seminars in the schedule, and (c) Increase engagement by grad students during Q&A.

Ongoing improvement actions

At the August faculty meeting, faculty were again urged to attend the seminars. Similar statements will be included in faculty annual performance reviews. At the next extension committee meeting, we will discuss contributing as speakers. I have been steadily encouraging students to be active participants.

2. Recruit undergraduate students who want to be in the program, with emphasis on increasing freshman numbers, excelling in racial and ethnic diversity, and addressing a gender imbalance.

Assessment method

Our primary source of information on undergraduate enrollment is the roster periodically distributed by the College. The most recent one was released in September, 2015.

Results

In fall, 2015, AEC has 21 entering freshmen, which is 8% of the student body, similar to last year. In September, 2015, 20% of the major's 256 undergrads are women, down from last year, but on the high end of previous years. Over 12% of AEC undergrads are from minority groups, about the same as last year. Men are under-represented in student leadership roles and on the Dean's List. Many of our minority students are members of UK's three-time national championship MANRRS chapter, and several participated in education abroad courses. Several landed excellent positions with major employers.

Analysis of results and reflection

One of the biggest factors in the increased numbers of freshmen and minority students in our program is having Erica Flores as our academic coordinator. The department houses the CAFE Diversity Office, is one of the major sponsors of the annual Jr. MANRRS conference, subsidizes student travel to regional and national MANRRS conferences, and its chair is on the Diversity Advisory Council.

Ongoing improvement actions

Continuing our current activities, enthusiasm, and financial support is expected to bring further progress. Recent requirements that students earn a C or better in MA 109, MA 123, and ECO 201 may inadvertently shift the gender balance, given national trends in academic performance. Recent salary surveys indicate that Ag Econ graduates earn higher average starting salaries than most majors.

3. Redesign the department's website to enhance its recruiting potential for graduate and undergraduate students.

Assessment method

Current and prospective student feedback is the primary means of assessment.

Results

Both current and prospective students consistently told us that our website was not a recruiting asset. Two years ago, a departmental committee collected information, and our IT staff prepared a renovation. This activity was halted by College efforts to create an updated and consistent College platform for departmental websites. Much time passed.

Analysis of results and reflection

The College-level effort continued to move slowly, and involves a platform that does not allow for easy updating nonspecialists. Karen Pulliam constructed a website that is consistent with CAFE formatting, and meets our needs well. The finished product went live in July, 2015, and is a big improvement.

Ongoing improvement actions

Aside from maintenance, this portion of the implementation plan has been achieved. We will continue to seek feedback from users and visitors.

4. Make conscious strategic decisions about involvement in distance learning.

Assessment method

Course schedules, enrollment numbers, student evaluations, and discussions in undergraduate committee and faculty meetings are the main items used for assessment.

Results

Roger Brown has long taught a hybrid core course in Ag Marketing (AEC 305). Online lab exercises are used in some sections of Ag Management (AEC 302), and a fully online version was offered once in summer, 2013. A fully online version of Microeconomics (AEC 303) was offered in summer, 2013. Recently, our enrollment stabilized, and an RCM budget model is much less likely.

Analysis of results and reflection

The distance learning courses allowed more students to be served. The additional capacity helped keep seniors from taking core courses late in their programs. The hybrid AEC 305 course encourages interaction, allows face-to-face interaction, and seems well-received. The online AEC 302 labs let students replay instructions, and seems superior to the live experience in some ways. The AEC 303 distance learning version was a basic talking head / PowerPoint delivery that was not received well.

Ongoing improvement actions

With diminished need, we are not pursuing further online course development at this time. Faculty must be personally interested and convinced it will not reduce quality of learning. Roger Brown continually offers to help faculty learn the tools he tests and uses.

5. Enable students to have experiential education and education abroad opportunities.

Assessment method

Track enrollment in ISP 599 for education abroad activities, assess career preparation potential of internships during approval of AEC 399 learning contract, and discuss progress with employers.

Results

All entering AEC undergraduates now fulfill an experiential education requirement. After offering many education abroad courses in 2013-14, few were offered in 2014-15. However, in 2015-16, we are planning courses in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, France and Switzerland, China, and northern Thailand. Education abroad participation rates in AEC are below 10%, but are climbing slowly. We provided \$500 - \$2,000 subsidies per student. The annual symposium in which students present their experiential education is high-impact, with several employers attending. Our Academic Coordinator works closely with several employers. Last year, several undergrad students were hired at \$50,000 salaries by one such company. Two AEC courses involve consulting / service projects for external clientele. A highlight is student leadership regarding the renovation of the Cooper House. Student participation in academic competitions increased in recent years. UK's Ag Econ teams won the 2014 Food Distribution Research Society case study competition, and were finalists in our discipline's national quiz bowl competition. Nate Trull placed third in our national undergraduate research paper contest.

Analysis of results and reflection

Subsidizing education abroad students allowed several students to participate. Given its impact on student development, and the high regard of employers, we intend to continue these subsidies. The consulting projects, academic competitions, and emphasis on professional soft skills are producing encouraging results. Major factors are college-wide experiential education requirements, an enthusiastic Academic Coordinator, and peer leadership among students.

Ongoing improvement actions

As the experiential education requirement now affects almost all AEC students, scaling up is a challenge. Experiential education, education abroad, and supporting competition teams and consulting opportunities will continue to be a funding priority. The next highest use of funds is graduate funding.

6. Enhance graduate student opportunities to work in extension via applied research, and increase the extension faculty role in the graduate program.

Assessment method

Maintain contact with employers who offer extension-related opportunities. Discuss outreach-related opportunities during prospective student visits, reiterate opportunities

to graduate students, encourage participation with funding for the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA) graduate student extension competition, and provide financial support for the departmental Summer Ag Tour for graduate students.

Results

In fall, 2015, we have several new MS students with extension-related interests. The extension faculty are willing to advise graduate students and be members of thesis committees. The leading employer of grad research assistants is an extension faculty member. In the last two years, four MS students have gone directly into careers related to extension, outreach, or agriculture finance.

Analysis of results and reflection

Encouraging students to target an area of applied economics with abundant career potential is a way to differentiate our graduate program, and is consistent with our Land Grant mission. Difficulty arises when students with high potential struggle with math and theory in the research-based grad program.

Ongoing improvement actions

A faculty member is now teaching an MS-level agricultural management course that can be made accessible to both extension agents and students. We will continue promoting the Summer Ag Tour and use the Kentucky Farm Business Management (KFBM) program to introduce grad students to extension-related data analysis. Collaborations between research and extension faculty are now frequent, and this serves grad students well.

7. Increase grant funding.

Assessment method

Track grant expenditures, graduate students funded on grants, and the mix of grants among extension and research faculty, and among junior and senior faculty.

Results

Per the Office of Sponsored Projects Administration (OSPA), realized income for AEC in FY14 was \$1,250,818, down from \$1,644,550 in FY13, but up from \$796,810 in FY12, \$867,860 in FY11, and \$657,295 in FY10. The FY14 total included \$601,161 of salaries and wages, \$477,554 of current expenses, and \$172,103 of indirect expenses. In FY15, sponsored project awards received through the University of Kentucky Research Foundation (UKRF), a subset of grants, contracts, and income, totaled \$681,135, down slightly from \$719,675 in FY14. Of that amount, 15% was obtained by 2 research faculty PIs, and 85% was obtained by 4 extension faculty PIs, implying that over two-thirds of the faculty attracted no grant funding during the year. Wethington Awards

totaled \$126,008 in FY15, up sharply from \$66,253 in FY14, \$76,729 in FY13, and \$61,625 in FY12, with extension faculty receiving 79% of the FY15 awards.

Analysis of results and reflection

External funding for grad students comes from grants or salary savings freed up by grants. Extension faculty contribute the vast majority. Research faculty have obtained gifts that often support at least one graduate student. The department has budgeted internal funding for approximately 9 graduate research assistants. The standard assistantship stipend is low relative to many peer institutions, and grants offer a way to offer higher stipends. Despite grantsmanship supporting the graduate program being a specific expectation listed in every research faculty position description, overcoming a culture from years when public funding was more abundant is difficult. Research faculty face few personal incentives to pursue grants, relative to extension faculty.

Ongoing improvement actions

Two research faculty were recently hired who are expected to bring in much grant funding, and one junior research faculty member is showing promise in grantsmanship. Highlighting the graduate program's reliance on faculty grantsmanship, and efforts to recognize that MS and PhD graduates are important research "outputs" are the main improvement actions that will be pursued.

8. Track and reward research impact

Assessment method

As of the last faculty APR cycle, AEC research faculty were asked to document research impacts using whatever criteria they deemed reasonable. This is appropriate since we started from a position of no formal tracking of research impacts. A detailed hierarchy appears in last year's report.

Results

Compared to last year, slightly more faculty have registered with Research Papers in Economics (RePEc), Google Scholar, and/or ResearchGate, but it remains difficult to measure citations and downloads accurately. Grant funding is easier to track and concentrated among a minority of the faculty. Journal articles with high impact factors are rare, but new faculty are expected to hit these occasionally. Recent collaborations between research and extension faculty will produce research used by policy makers. Some faculty submitted evidence of research impacts as part of the APR process last fall.

Analysis of results and reflection

Letting faculty define impacts using their own criteria in the APR process will raise awareness and achieve the goal without overly constraining varying definitions of what constitutes “applied” research.

Ongoing improvement actions

Currently the measurement of research impacts is only slightly more advanced than it was last year, and it will be refined through discussions and developing metrics.