

PROGRAM REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION PLAN
ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT



**Department of
Agricultural Economics**

2023-2024

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Recommendation 1. Develop a strategic vision ahead of key position transitions within the department including providing leadership training for those in or considering leadership roles. Diversity should be a key point of consideration in future hires and targets (race, gender, etc.). Also need to ensure competitiveness in hiring as most agricultural economic departments have moved to 9-month faculty positions for at least research/teaching positions.

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

Results

Dr. Barry Barnett retired at the end of December 2023. Dr. Steve Isaacs served as interim chair between January 1, 2024, and August 31, 2024. The department welcomed a new chair, Dr. Aslihan Spaulding, on September 1, 2024.

Dr. Zhao's assignment is changed to 9 months. The Department hired Dr. Thomas Keene on the Regular Title Series with the rank of Assistant Professor with a 12-month assignment.

Dr. Jordan Shockley is participating the LEAD21 program. "The primary purpose of LEAD21 is to develop leaders in land grant institutions and their strategic partners who link research, academics, and extension in order to lead more effectively in an increasingly complex environment, either in their current position or as they aspire to other positions." <https://lead-21.org/>

AEC Extension group conducted a strategic planning retreat July 17-18, 2024, with the goal of reviewing programming and resources in the context of upcoming retirements and changes in departmental and college administration. The summary of the results was presented at the September 2024 Extension group meeting.

Analysis of results and reflection

Departmental faculty and staff regularly discuss future goals for our various Land-Grant mission areas to develop, maintain, and update our collective strategic vision. However, we agree that it would be valuable to commit that vision to a written form.

The university offers various academic leadership training programs. Interested faculty are encouraged to apply for those programs.

The department has long made efforts to promote diversity in faculty hiring pools. Should the College allow it, we are willing to consider future instruction and/or research faculty hires as 9-month appointments. However, this change must be introduced in a manner that is also equitable for faculty with primary Extension appointments.

Ongoing improvement actions

The undergraduate committee, graduate/research committee, and extension committee will develop vision statements for their areas of responsibility. These vision statements will be shared with the faculty for feedback. The goal is to develop a departmental strategic plan.

Recommendation 2. Conduct undergraduate curriculum review and revision with an explicit plan for continual periodic reviews to ensure relevance and competitiveness in a constantly evolving job market.

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

The department held a day-long retreat in August 2023 to talk about improvements to the Undergraduate program ([topic list](#)). This [Excel file](#) shows the complete results of the faculty survey about priority areas for program redesign with [summary preferences color-coded](#) and [written comments](#) compiled. Potential program improvements were many, including (1) attract more and better students, (2) provide more internship support, (3) emphasize Excel more, (4) increase math readiness, including reconsideration of the calculus requirement, (5) add professional development opportunities, (6) identify better track names, (7) distinguish the tracks in more meaningful ways, (8) make course sequencing more relevant, (9) add a true sales course and maybe others, e.g., trade, (10) make AEC 302 more sustainable, and (11) improve options for student to create portfolio-ready assignments. The top three priority areas were better recruitment, improved career mentoring, and updated program.

Results

Changes were made to the undergrad program to change the prerequisite on AEC 303 to require only a passing grade in calculus and not a “C or better”. The faculty approved creating several new tracks focused on related disciplines like agronomy, policy, environment, community development, and animal sciences. Formal implementation of this change will require additional teaching resources which are not currently available. The interim plan is to describe these tracks informally in advising and marketing materials.

The program will also implement a new career and professional advising program for students starting in the spring 2025 semester. Faculty and staff advisors in AEC will advise students about career and professional issues, including mental health resilience each fall and spring semester. Advising notes about student’s career/professional interests and needs will be shared with the AEC academic advisor (Mr. Herald) who will assist students with course selection.

Analysis of results and reflection

The AEC faculty needs time for further consideration of recommendations from the Undergraduate Committee that involved significant changes to the B.S. program (e.g., create a track that does not require calculus and create a single capstone course for Agribusiness track and the Ag Econ track).

Ongoing improvement actions

Improvement efforts continue into FY25 with on-going attention to career and professional advising and increasing teaching demands for AEC 302 (Farm Management) (serving students from many departments/programs including equine, pre-vet, animal sciences, NRE, sustainable ag, ag education, ag ecosystems, etc.)

Recommendation 3. Prioritize finalizing, approving, and implementing changes in the graduate program that have been initiated.

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

Results

The graduate/research committee presented proposed MS program changes at the October 2023 faculty meeting. These program changes passed in November 2023.

Analysis of results and reflection

The department is committed to offering an outstanding MS program. Further discussion regarding the future of the PhD program has been postponed until after the MS curriculum changes are finalized. There is general agreement among the faculty that we have neither the teaching resources nor the financial resources (following the university's drastic reduction in the number of graduate tuition waivers) to offer a traditional PhD program. At the same time, we see value in being able to offer PhD level training to a small number of students – especially those interested in Extension. The question we are considering is whether it would be possible for us to offer a non-traditional PhD program for a small number of students and whether doing so would be the best use of our limited teaching and financial resources.

Ongoing improvement actions

The department is in the process of submitting changes to the MS curriculum during fall of 2024. The graduate/research committee has articulated a plan for offering PhD training given the ongoing constraints.

Recommendation 4. Work with M-G CAFE upper administration and KFBM staff to develop a plan to have more public good output from the KFBM program investment.

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

Results

The association commissioned report was released in early 2024 and has generated considerable discussion among cooperators, staff, and administration. Following discussion, KFBM staff expressed a need for a programmatic strategic plan. College administration supports an external review of the entire program, its impact, its future role, staffing and governance, and the viability of the current funding model.

One of the specialists left the program and her cooperators followed her and left the program as well. There is no non-compete agreement in place.

Analysis of results and reflection

KFBM specialists are open to engaging in discussions to better align the program's goals and outcomes with those of the department, college, and university. We also recognize that enhanced or additional output from KFBM may be dependent on additional or reallocation of resources.

Faculty and staff at the Extension Retreat also discussed KFBM. They recognized the value of program and especially the specialists to AEC's Extension mission. Immediate need for resources in the department is to upload materials to KFBM's website to address the recommendation from the departmental review of providing public access to KFBM summary data. There is a potential trade-off of additional extension programming by some specialists in lieu of a lower cooperator base which ideally could deliver better and more detailed data from remaining cooperators. The specialists asked faculty to send them a spreadsheet of data they need. Then, the specialists will provide an assessment if the data are available and realistically accessible in an economically efficient manner under the current structure of the database.

Ongoing improvement actions

KFBM cooperators commissioned a study to compare the program in Kentucky with similar programs in other states. The report provided insights to inform decision making about the future directions for the KFBM program. We are in the process of finding an external professional to help with a Strategic Plan for KFBM.

Recommendation 5. Maintain and enhance existing strong Extension presence and impact throughout Kentucky.

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

Results

The department is proud of our long history of having an active Extension presence throughout Kentucky. We have every intention of maintaining and, as resources allow, enhancing that presence. The faculty and staff discussed many topics including programming, communication, staffing, graduate program, and resources, during the retreat.

Analysis of results and reflection

The department will remain active throughout Kentucky. The department will continue to be intentional in obtaining input from county agents and stakeholders regarding Extension programming needs.

As funding allows, the department will continue to make extensive use of staff in developing and delivering Extension programming.

Staff positions will continue to be re-evaluated and reclassified to address needs.

Ongoing improvement actions

Departmental Extension faculty and staff meet regularly (approximately three times each year) with the Economics and Community Development Committee of the Kentucky Association of County Agricultural Agents (KACAA) to discuss programming needs. In addition, the chair, Extension coordinator, and all Extension faculty and staff are intentional about maintaining communication with county agents.

Departmental Extension faculty and staff meet monthly to plan programming.

Recommendation 6. Enhance external support, scholarship, and research/extension output related to the land-grant mission.

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

Results

External support has increased in recent years. Historically, three faculty members consistently attracted large amounts of grant funding, but an increasing number of faculty are now attracting grant funding for research and Extension programs.

New faculty hires continue to be mentored on the importance of external funding.

Several Extension staff are also mentored in pursuing grant funding as part of a transition plan for future faculty retirements.

CEDIK has hired a Financial Manager to assist with grants management as well as purchasing, reporting and reimbursements.

The departments two time-limited “off budget” staff positions have been instrumental in supporting efforts across the three mission areas.

The Brannon International Fund recently enabled five graduate students to participate in the 2024 International Food & Agribusiness Management’s Student Case Study Competition in Almeria, Spain. Additionally, the Fund enabled a graduate student to conduct field research in Honduras; an undergraduate student to spend a semester in South Korea; and a faculty member to present his research at an international annual conference. This fund played a vital role in covering key expenses, such as conference fees, accommodations, and travel, allowing our students to represent the department on a global stage. We look forward to implementing the additional Brannon Scholarships, which will further support students in the department.

Analysis of results and reflection

Assistant professors and early associate professors have been increasingly successful in attracting funding (including funding from nationally competitive sources). A concern is that some faculty are limiting grant applications because neither the department nor the university sponsored programs office seem to have sufficient staff bandwidth to adequately support grant recipients.

We are also negatively impacted by the following recent changes to NIFA indirect cost limitations and UK F&A rate policy. Due to the changes, a couple of the grant proposals had to be modified and additional funds were needed to help the PIs.

*NIFA grants, including those awarded by NIFA through joint calls with other agencies like NSF, restrict F&A to 30% of total federal funds awarded (TFFA). The cap takes into account all funds awarded to partners via subawards. **Subaward F&A plus UK’s F&A must not exceed 30% of the total request to NIFA.***

*UK recently received a new federal F&A rate agreement and Agricultural Research is now charged at a rate of 46% of Modified Total Direct Costs (MTDC). In addition, Federal Uniform Guidance has updated the amount of each subaward that can be charged F&A in calculating MTDC. Any grant awarded after October 1 will be charged our federally negotiated rate (46% for research) on the first \$50,000 of each subaward when using MTDC. This change is not yet reflected in the language on OSPA's website, but all proposals being submitted to NIFA now include the updated calculation. **This significantly increases the amount of F&A the UK budget contributes to the 30% cap (TFFA) when there are multiple subawards over \$50K. When combined with the subaward F&A amounts, we are finding this puts many proposal budgets with subs above the 30% TFFA limit.***

*It is UK's current policy to collect the maximum F&A amount allowed by the federal program, and OSPA will expect partners to lower the rates they charge in order to stay below the cap. Some partners may not accept this rate. Please be aware that UK will not reduce its F&A rate charged without the department agreeing to cover the difference via a waiver request, which is supposed to be submitted 10 working days prior to the deadline. **Therefore, it is advised that Pls finalize budgets for both UK and the subawards at the start of the proposal process to avoid last-minute issues with meeting the 30% TFFA cap.***

We try to meet the needs with our internal, limited resources which is a challenge. Skilled staff are essential to support the successful execution of work generated by enhanced external support, scholarship funding, and research/extension programs. Our concern is our ability to retain staff members as the "off budget" positions do not generate raise pool funds and promotion and retention efforts for all staff are limited by HR policies. Recent retirements and vacant positions have further strained remaining staff positions.

Ongoing improvement actions

All faculty hired in recent years have been mentored regarding the importance of external funding for the development of their research/Extension programs and support of departmental graduate students.

Academic coordinator positions are vacant, and we are in the process of revising the MJRs for these positions to better serve the priority needs of the department.

Recommendation 7. Departmental leadership and faculty should actively work with the Martin-Gatton CAFE's Office of Philanthropy and Alumni to pursue funding for endowed positions or distinguished professorships focusing on the department's three pillars (regional economics/community development, agricultural resource/production economics, marketing/consumer demand).

Assessment method

Observation is the most practical means of assessing progress. When available, data will be used.

Results

The department has made notable strides in securing financial support for several areas, but none for the endowed positions/distinguished professorships yet.

The department received the Brannon Endowment, a significant contribution aimed at fostering international engagement. Dr. Kusunose has been tasked with administering these funds, overseeing the application and decision-making processes, managing finances, and reporting back to the donor.

To further strengthen philanthropic efforts, Emma White, the Philanthropy Officer Associate, joined the team on April 22, 2024. This role is shared between the Agricultural Economics Department, KALP, and the Department of Entomology, with a primary focus on enhancing alumni and industry support and engagement. Emma will also be responsible for accurately tracking transdisciplinary philanthropic efforts between the department and other areas within the college.

Analysis of results and reflection

The identified three pillars guide only our hiring of research faculty and recruitment of graduate students. Extension faculty and staff needs are more comprehensive. We agree that funding for endowed positions is becoming more critical for recruiting and retaining outstanding faculty.

Emma White has been tasked with identifying and engaging donors interested in supporting the department's faculty through these key endowments. This initiative is aligned with the broader goal of strengthening our faculty's ability to innovate and lead in their respective fields.

Ongoing improvement actions

We will pursue funding to support endowed faculty positions as well as scholarships that will support both undergraduate and graduate students who demonstrate unmet financial need and are committed to the department.

Moving forward, Emma White will take on the critical role of stewarding Janice Brannon's continued support, ensuring ongoing engagement and alignment with the future department's goals. Additionally, Emma will focus on building a strong pipeline of donors, managing relationships with contributors at both the annual giving and major gift levels to sustain and grow financial support for the department.