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Arkansas Symposium: Opportunities and Challenges of Colleges of Agriculture at Land-Grant Universities

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Friends, we've got trouble.

Yes, "... we got trouble,

Right here in River City!

With a capital 'T'

That rhymes with 'P'

And that stands for - "

Well, in the musical "The Music Man," where these lines originate, the "P" stood for "Pool."

"Pool" as in "Pool Hall," and all the less-than-edifying experiences the word conjured up for worried River-City-parents.

For those of us involved with colleges of agriculture at this nation's great land-grant universities, for those of us who know the good work these colleges do, and are firm believers such
work will be vital as long as people eat, drink, breathe, learn and grow, the “P” for us today – the “P” that rhymes with trouble’s “T” – is Perceptions.

Perceptions without, and perceptions within, our institutions.

Perceptions among our key-constituents; perceptions among those audiences we need to grow; perceptions among university colleagues, administrators, and regents whose fields are not in agriculture-and-natural resources; perceptions among our own faculty and staff whose fields are in agriculture-and natural resources; and perceptions among legislators, both at the state-level and nationally.

People base decisions on what they perceive as true. Those decisions drive what they believe, what they support, what they do.

If people do not see that anything done at a college with its «roots» in agriculture has anything to do with their lives, we are in trouble. You and I may be keenly aware that it is an extremely foolish nation that whistles away its ability to feed itself in the
face of attack, embargo, or boycott, but friends – if the people of this country don’t get that, we’ve got big trouble.

Yes, I know. Not everyone in this country ever will understand that message. Not everyone needs to do so. What is needed, however – what is absolutely vital – is for some key people to understand. Decision makers. Key groups of constituents. Those who will study, learn, and grow with us. Those who will contact our state legislators when our budgets are under attack, those who will write letters to the editor, those who will talk enthusiastically to prospective students about the great education we offer, those who will come to our campuses when our top administrators don’t understand the value of agriculture in our respective states. Those who will stand for us and with us.

Now, before I go any further today, let me acknowledge that I am a great admirer of the late Dr. James H. Meyer. Many of the ideas I will explore today are ideas familiar to anyone who has read Meyer’s “Rethinking the Outlook of Colleges Whose
Roots Have Been in Agriculture."

In 1992, Jim Meyer did a "masterful job" of outlining concerns, issues, and challenges that colleges, whose roots have been in agriculture, need to meet. Those of us who "work in" and care about these colleges have been talking about his many valid points ever since. Thing is, talk without action will get us nowhere.

I have a colleague who points out – sometimes with asperity – that hands are not made for wringing; hands are made for doing. Action is better than angst. So today I remind each of us of the need for action. Action on behalf of our colleges of agriculture at this nation’s land-grant universities. And what better place to do so than "right here" at the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences in Fayetteville? Certainly Senator Bumpers is a man of action, a man who has thought deeply, "with vision," and has rolled up his sleeves and gotten things done. That’s evidenced within this college, at the Dale Bumpers National Rice Research Station, at the Dale Bumpers
Small Farms Research Center, at the Dale and Betty Bumpers Vaccine Research Center, to cite only some of the most obvious examples.

We must, each of us present here today, be doers in dealing with the perceptions and realities our colleges face.

We must be proud, and be loud, in telling our story.

As colleges whose roots are in agriculture in land-grant universities, we have a great deal to offer. That's the story we need to tell again and again – in 30 second eye-openers for anyone we're talking with, followed by a quick and let me tell you more...” We must tell that story in understandable language to people who associate agriculture only with production – and don’t see its place in their lives.

Of course we have a place in their lives. We’re the food and water and sustainable-environment people. We’re the youth and family folks. We deal with the very-basics of life – the basics none of us can live without. What could be more impressive than that?
"Unfortunately", we haven't been very good at making clear why an interest – and an investment – in our agriculture, natural resources and human resources teaching, research and extension education programs is in everyone's enlightened self-interest.

I know a marketer who says greed, fear and ease drive people to action. Will it make or save me money? Will it keep me, my family and my community safer? Will it make my life easier?

Yes, yes, and yes! The work done in our land-grant colleges whose roots are in agriculture provides a resounding "yes" to each of those questions. That's the story we must tell.

In the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln we define agriculture as everything from the farm-gate to the restaurant-plate. Yes, we mean production agriculture. We also mean food safety. New product development. Resource management. Water. Nutriceuticals. Farmaceuticals. Redox biology. We mean biochemistry and genomics and some of the most heavy-duty,
mind-blowing science anyone could ever dream about. We mean rural development and families, youth development, nutrition, and animal care.

Yet if that's not how decision makers, if that's not how constituents, if that's not how the new audiences we need to cultivate and the youth we want and must attract to our colleges perceive agriculture, then we have a huge problem. We must work assiduously to change the perception. Sometimes in mass messages, but much more often in targeted messages to specific audiences, and one-on-one conversations.

We provide a tremendous education in our colleges, education that leads to lucrative, fulfilling careers. Our science is BIG—VERY BIG—science. For those students with scientific and social-consciousness interests, what could be better than benefiting people, preserving and helping manage the precious resource of water, developing new products, revitalizing rural communities, strengthening families, and perhaps, through their very own work, saving large portions of a population from starvation?
Every chance we get we need to *leap* to answer the question, "what have you done for me lately?" We need to *make* the opportunity to *raise* that question as often as possible – with decision makers, with taxpayers, with students – because the answers we can provide are so great. Our existence – and our future as relevant, vibrant institutions – depends on our ability to answer that question well. *And often.*

"What have we contributed to the economy? What have we contributed to people’s lives?"

In Nebraska, when talking to the appropriate audience, we can say our scientists’ *pioneering research* demonstrating the feasibility, benefits, and economic advantages of feeding ethanol byproducts wet instead of drying them first and shipping them to dry feed markets has provided an *economic benefit* to Nebraska of about $400 million between 1992 and 2004.

We can say *extensive muscle-profiling research* conducted by our scientists laid the groundwork for the beef industry to develop exciting new products, such as the popular flat iron
steak, that have increased demand and added $50 to $70 in value per head in the past seven years.

More than 26 million cattle are fed and marketed in the U.S. each year. That represents $1.3 billion to $1.8 billion in added value annually. More than 20,000 restaurants nationwide now offer these new beef cuts on their menus. Industry experts expect 10 million pounds of flat iron steaks to be sold in 2005.

Beef is big business in Nebraska. We are tending to business. The work our scientists do matters.

I know each of you has similar, powerful, concrete examples you can provide. I hope you provide them often. Loudly. Proudly. The world’s population is increasing. Water is a finite resource. Drought is very real – and especially devastating – in so many parts of the world. Rural areas and rural populations have serious economic-and-social concerns. So do urban areas and populations. We are – or we can be – a connector between the two.
WE.

ARE.

VITAL.

The need for what we do is not diminishing. It’s expanding, moving in additional and exciting directions. I submit the need for our work grows each day, with every baby born, with every hope each child engenders.

Internally, we must be ambassadors with our colleagues in other colleges, who may deduce declines in the number of farmers and ranchers make agriculture passe’; who may lust for our budgets, and argue those dollars should be diverted to new areas of need.

Certainly we fight that fight in Nebraska. Even though we are a powerhouse agricultural state, where agriculture is the leading industry and where more than one in five Nebraskans is involved in farm or farm-related jobs, where 93 percent of the state’s total land area is devoted to farming and ranching, we have people both within and outside the university who seem to
perceive agriculture and related areas as past. Some of them appear pretty dedicated to that perception as well.

Our Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources was created by the Nebraska Legislature in 1973. It came into being in 1974 after more than a decade of discussions, proposals, and controversies over university administrative structure, and a very real concern of Nebraska agricultural producers that agriculture and natural resources were not faring well in the university’s internal priority setting.

Key producers and agribusiness people were willing to put themselves and their time where their concerns were. When the Institute began, Nebraska ranked sixth of all states in the nation on the basis of cash receipts from farm-marketing. Today, our state typically ranks fourth nationwide. We are first in commercial livestock slaughter, first in commercial red meat production, first in commercial cattle slaughter, and first in Great Northern bean production.
Our supporters' concerns were real; the return on their faith and investment in our programs demonstrates the accuracy of their view. Today Agriculture Builders of Nebraska, Inc., is a very-real pillar of private-citizen support for the Institute and the entire University of Nebraska. During the past several years of budget crises in our state and much of the country, when legislators were slashing university budgets, in Nebraska it was Agriculture Builders of Nebraska who stepped up for the entire university. They worked on behalf of the university budget, vocal in their support of education, and of our work.

These are articulate people who are committed to the importance of the work we do. These are constituents we respect, and value, and need. While we must develop new audiences and new supporters, none of us in this room today - and certainly not those of us at Nebraska - can afford to lose the support of these very important people in our lives.

At one point in 1973 they pushed for a separate campus for agriculture within the university system. Now, THAT caught the
attention of top university administrators, as well as Regents and State Legislators! Negotiations followed and, in the end, the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources was formed through a new "state-statute" rather than as a separate campus with its own Chancellor. The Institute was given — and continues to have — system-wide responsibility for agriculture and natural resources programs. Today the Vice Chancellor of the Institute also is a Vice President for the entire university system, reporting to the system President and Board of Regents.

Within the Institute are our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, our Agricultural Research Division, and our Cooperative Extension Division. The research and extension-education programs of UNL's College of Education and Human Sciences, also fall within the Institute.

I'm proud to say we've been "a leader" in adopting closer "working-relationships" among teaching, research, and extension, and have taken the Kellogg Commission's "call for engagement" very seriously in Nebraska. Personally, I consider extension—
education the best out-of-the-formal classroom experience ever yet devised anywhere on the globe.

Yet as Jim Meyers told us, and I quote, “in examining the challenges for the Land Grant College as a whole, it is clear that extension faces the most difficult challenges when compared with those of teaching and research. The uncertainty of clientele, questions regarding issues that Extension should address, and the very-significant structural changes needed to adapt to a broader clientele, are daunting indeed.”

As I look at extension, I submit that it has reinvented itself, has grown and expanded its programming as our clients’ diverse needs have expanded, more than any other organization I can think of. Yet I cannot tell you how many people I encounter in my work whose perception of extension is firmly – and I mean firmly! – rooted in a 1950s Norman Rockwell image of this essential third branch of any land-grant university.

How do we combat that? How do we change perception to reality for key decision-makers? How do we arm our constituents
and extension, "thank goodness," has among its fervent supporters, its 4-H moms and dads, its traditional clients, and its new audiences whose lives are improved because of the "education" extension offers - how do we arm these people with the tools necessary to help us spread the message? How do we arm ourselves?

Again I say, be proud. And be loud.

When I encounter one of those folks with the Norman Rockwell image of extension I assure them the dedication to clientele and mission seen in Rockwell's portrait of an extension agent visiting a family farm to check out a 4-H'ers calf is alive and well in 2005. That dedication and educational mission still drive our extension-specialists and educators to take the riches and resources of the university to where people are. That may mean a workshop, a one-on-one meeting with a single mother trying to heighten her parenting, budgeting, and work skills to improve her family's life, or on the road with our new self-contained mobile technology classroom built to provide high-
speed computing and technology education in under-served communities across Nebraska.

I tell them about our EDGE program – EDGE stands for Enhancing, Developing and Growing Entrepreneurs – which, since 1993, has helped nearly 2,000 Nebraskans transform their ideas into viable business-opportunities, creating full- and part-time jobs across our state. We all know what even a few new jobs mean in small communities – the value is huge! A recent survey of EDGE participants demonstrated that since participating in EDGE, 33 percent of them added new employees. More than 70 percent increased their business volume.

I tell them about our Republican River Basin Irrigation Management Project in water-short southwest Nebraska. There extension teaches research-based strategies for conserving water. I report that program participants estimate the knowledge gained through this program is worth an average of about $16,500 per operation, or, conservatively, $2 million a year.
I talk about the life-enriching experiences of 4-H. I note that in the Institute we proudly say we are "partners" with Nebraska, and I emphasize "how seriously" we take that partnership. I speak of "how" extension so values its partnership with Nebraska, so "focuses" on providing lifelong, life-enhancing education, so collaborates "with others" to provide Nebraskans "valuable" educational experiences, including "training trainers" who then provide consultation or training for others, that people don't always realize it is extension "adding value" to their lives. Sometimes, I say, extension "forgets" to toot its own horn.

I toot it. Loudly. Proudly. Emphasizing the many, many ways "reality" differs from that lovely, nostalgic, but thoroughly outdated, 1950s Rockwell perception.

Now. Just as we must deal with the perceptions of those "external" to the university, and internally with "the perceptions" of colleagues in other colleges, we also must deal, "internally," with the "perceptions" of our own faculty and staff. Together we must "understand" the change engulfing us all, and respond to it well, if
we are to be “leaders” in our states and universities.

Universities, by their nature, do not move quickly. Ours is a tradition of careful study and consideration. Careful consideration is good. Yet we cannot allow it to make us hidebound. Critics charge we are slow to change, slow to report out research findings, slow to react to new needs, out-of-touch and out-of-date. Some say that instead of leading change we react to it – not always well – at a rate not in sync with society’s needs. This is a perception we cannot afford.

We must be “very careful” that we not become a land that time forgot, considered irrelevant by the “very-people” our land-grant universities were formed to serve. Jim Meyer said it is deans who are “most important” in the process of leading change here. There’s challenge – and there’s opportunity – for colleges of agriculture deans. To lead change on a timeline perceived by our constituents as “reasonable”, rather than a timeline more comfortable to winding-slowly-down the academic trail. We have to provide “the vision” for change, the tools for change, and the
rewards for changing. We have to hire people with the ability to change, to adapt to it, and to help others do so, as well.

Before the Morrill Act of 1862, before land-grant universities, higher education belonged primarily to the wealthy. Justin Morrill and Abraham Lincoln changed the landscape of this great country with their vision of and hope for what might be, and their determination to make it possible.

This is our heritage. How can we do less?

Dr. Meyer made the case that while we can and must offer students much more than our rich education in production agriculture, our very names – names of our colleges and names of our departments – reflect the emphasis of a bygone era. We need to look at that. We need to work at ever-expanding the definitions of those terms for our audiences.

In our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources within the Institute at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we’re looking at new programs that build on our traditional strengths to expand our student base. For instance,
we’ve started a new Professional Golf Management program, based on our strong turf program, and accredited by the PGA. While most of the Professional Golf Management programs in the country are based out of business colleges, with an emphasis on business management, ours has a strong science bent – turf science. This fall we have 74 students enrolled in Professional Golf Management. THE PGA LIMITS THE SIZE OF THE PROGRAM TO 300 STUDENTS per campus.

People both within the Institute and those outside it have questioned this new program, as well as other new programs we are considering. Some charge the new programs take away from our traditional education. I reply it is new programs such as this one that bring us a more diverse student body and additional tuition dollars to help ensure traditional agricultural programs remain strong.

When it comes to production agriculture, Nebraska built its program correctly. We are very strong. We have much to offer. Now we must have the vision, and the boldness, to build on our
traditional strengths to provide education and opportunities that encompass the needs and interests of a changing world.

It is a challenge - and a great opportunity - to help urban as well as rural students realize that if they are interested in science, if they are interested in business, if they are interested in banking or food safety or new product development or people or community development, we have a place for them.

It is a challenge - and a very real opportunity - to embrace new needs and new audiences while maintaining the support of our traditional clientele. We have so much to offer both. We can provide students a strong launching pad for successful, fulfilling careers. We conduct research of value across the rural and urban spectrum. Our extension-education programs reflect that wide-reaching work, as well. We need to tell that story, over and over again, one-on-one, in groups and en masse to people whose perceptions are different from our own, whose perceptions lead them away from us, when we have so much to offer.

We need to roll up our sleeves and recruit bright, ethnic
minority students – students who may be the first in their family to attend college, students who must be convinced there is a place for them with us, and the education we offer can 'springboard' them to a better life. Not only will we be fulfilling our land-grant university mission, we also will be growing our own 'future faculty.' We often are charged with a 'paucity' of minority instructors, and it's a change we cannot deny. We're good at 'growing' in our agricultural colleges. Let's lead here. Let's 'add that' to our proud land-grant university legacy.

We have taken great pains at Nebraska in the past several years to 'erase' any perception of faculty and staff within the Institute that they are not responsible for student recruiting if they do not have the words "student recruiter" after their names. They ARE responsible. Each of us is responsible. Recruitment is everyone's business. It is the business of "everyone" in this room, and we must be very, very serious about student recruitment and dedicated to it if we are to remain viable in the future.

And I tell you with complete seriousness – we ARE and WILL
BE viable. We are the land-grant university. We matter. Living up to our heritage, building on it to leave those who follow us even "grander bridges" on which to cross to the future – this is our challenge. This is our opportunity. This is our very, very great privilege.

Thank you.