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

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**ARKANSAS SYMPOSIUM
OPPORTUNITIES – AND CHALLENGES – OF COLLEGES OF AGRICULTURE
AT LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES
DECEMBER 2, 2005
JOHN C. OWENS
NU VICE PRESIDENT AND IANR HARLAN VICE CHANCELLOR**

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 ^{very} 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 ^{the} 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. Nutraceuticals. Pharmaceuticals. Redox biology. We mean ~~biochemistry~~ 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 ^{urban} 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, ^{those} who may deduce declines in the number of farmers and ranchers make agriculture passe'; ^{those} 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-marketings". 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 ~~many~~ ^{most of the 15} 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, ^{IN THE INAUGURAL CLASS OF THE PROGRAM.} ~~With them, this year we saw an increase in~~
^{THE PGA LIMIT IS THE SIZE OF THE PROGRAM TO 300 STUDENTS} ~~the number of students enrolled in this college.~~ ^{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.