

Agribusiness Field Trip from an Educational Perspective

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Abstract

Agribusiness field trips, as opposed to agribusiness internship courses, offer agribusiness and agricultural economics majors a broad exposure to the various segments of agribusiness. The University of Nevada, Reno, has offered during the spring semester, an agribusiness field trip to a number of agribusiness firms in California and Nevada. Students enrolled in the Spring 1984 course evaluated, through a questionnaire, facets of the field trip which were most educational to them and suggested improvements. The student questionnaires and experiences from past field trips indicate that the essential ingredients for a successful educational experience are to have a tour leader who is genuinely interested in the tour, enlist if possible an alumnus of your department to visit and/or set up visits in locations unfamiliar to the tour leader, and have owner operators as tour guides or discussants.

Introduction

Students enrolled in professional curricula such as agriculture often are concerned with the relevancy of their course work to real life situations. Courses have been designed to give students hand-on or practical experience with skills that are required in agriculture. Usually these courses are in a farm or ranch setting and give students job skills primarily in plant and/or animal science (Elkins and Lybecker, 1977; Mayer, 1980; Mortensen, 1981; Seals and Armstrong, 1983). Relevancy for agribusiness and agricultural economics students can be answered through internship programs.

However, for internship programs to be successful, agribusinessmen must be found who will cooperate with the internship program. Also, a student who enters the internship program gains only an in-depth understanding of the particular agribusiness firm or sector which he has selected or been assigned. Another possible curricula avenue that may give students a feeling of relevancy about their course work is an agribusiness field trip. Through an agribusiness field trip, unlike the internship program, students are exposed to the diversity of agribusiness and different business philosophies.

At the University of Nevada, Reno, an agribusiness field trip course is offered each spring semester. The course was developed to give agribusiness and agricultural economics students a brief introduction to the management and marketing practices used by successful agribusiness operations.

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Through observation and conversation with agribusiness owners and managers, agribusiness and agricultural economics majors can see how tools and theories learned in many agricultural economics courses are applied and used in daily operation of an agribusiness firm.

The primary purpose, therefore, of this paper is to discuss the educational benefits of an agribusiness field trip to agribusiness and agricultural economics majors. The paper will also discuss the preparation required to develop a field trip and the results of a questionnaire given to the students after the field trip was completed. Responses to the student questionnaire will be used to determine relevancy gained by the trip. Changes suggested by the students to enhance the agribusiness field trip will also be discussed.

Overview of Agribusiness Field Trip

The agribusiness field trip was developed to give students an opportunity to observe successful agribusiness operations and question owners and managers as to their method of operation. The course offered each spring semester alternates with trips through Nevada and California. The agribusiness field trip is scheduled during the week-long spring break and usually lasts four days. The spring 1984 field trip was in California and centered around Fresno, San Francisco, and Sacramento Valley. Students may take the course for one or two hours of credit. The student who takes the field trip for two hours of credit must prepare a paper about a specific establishment that was visited.

The Field Trip Tour Guide and Pre-Trip Planning

An integral component of a successful field trip is the faculty member who develops and leads the field trip. By the leader's enthusiasm and acquaintances with agribusiness professionals, the success of the field trip is substantially secured. The leader must invest considerable time in pre-trip preparation, leadership during the trip, and post-trip evaluation and grading of papers.

We have taken field trips to California several times before, so we knew many of the firms in San Francisco and the Sacramento Valley as excellent firms for educational purposes. However, this semester's trip also went to Fresno, a new area for the agribusiness field trip. We added the Fresno area to the field trip not only to let the students view large agribusiness operations in the San Joaquin Valley, but also because we were able, with help from an alumnus of the University of Nevada, Reno, to set up tours in the Fresno area. The alumnus was a bank loan officer at one of the branch banks in California and a recent

graduate of the Department of Agricultural Economics. Because he was only a few years out of college, the alumnus knew which agribusiness operations would be most beneficial to the students. The results of the student questionnaire show the excellence of the alumnus' choice of agribusiness firms from the student's perspective. Having a graduate of your department or University visit or set-up visitations will enhance the outcome of the trip.

Setting up a visitation schedule is the most difficult and demanding task for the tour leader. If a willing alumnus is available in the tour area to help set up tours of specific agribusiness firms, the work load for the tour leader is significantly reduced. Students, however, need to know before the trip starts who they are going to visit so they can be prepared for the specific agribusiness operation. Based on results of the student questionnaire, we plan to institute a pre-trip exercise requiring students to report on selected firms they will visit. Through this study we hope students will have a better understanding of agribusiness firms before their visit and have questions in mind before the tour begins. We also plan to require students to write introductory and thank you letters to the visited firms. Such a procedure will help students develop communication skills that will be needed later in the business world.

Pre-trip meetings were held during the semester to develop plans for the agribusiness field trip. By talking to the students we ascertained which firms would be of most interest to students enrolled in this semester's class. Also, we informed students of the costs of the field trip so students could make appropriate financial arrangements.

After conferring with our alumnus, we developed an itinerary and gave it to the students. Through the compact itinerary we tried in four days to cover all the different facets of agribusiness. The schedule allowed some free time for a drive along the Bay area. Since our trip occurred during northern Nevada's winter, California's coast line was a welcome relief to many students. Any itinerary for an agribusiness field trip should allow some time for fun, which enhances the value of the field trip.

The Agribusiness Field Trip

The main responsibility of the tour guide is to keep the field trip on schedule. This may be quite a chore and requires some artful tact since some agribusiness tour guides are quite talkative. Also, if an interesting agribusiness tour ensues and the guide is quite responsive to the students' questions, the tour leader must carefully weigh the educational value of an additional question versus keeping the field trip on schedule.

It also may be advantageous for the tour guide to put some time cushion into the itinerary. Not only do tours last longer than expected, but the tour guide can become lost traveling to the next establishment. If new agribusiness firms are to be visited, try to map out their

locations. However, unusual circumstances do arise: there may be more than one 1st. Avenue in a community, or the street that leads to the firm may be under construction. If the tour group gets lost, call the establishment, explain the problem, and try to get the field trip back on schedule.

Student Evaluation of Agribusiness

After the field trip was completed, students were given a questionnaire to rate agribusiness firms visited and give opinions to enhance the educational value of the field trip. Table 1 shows the rating of each firm visited. Goehring Meats Company, Dairy of Steve Maddox, and Harris Feedlot rated the highest. These tours were rated very high because the tour guide knew the operation of the plant and could go into detail when questioned. Also, these people seemed to care that the student had a good tour and adequately answered the students' questions.

The visits to the banks — Crocker Bank and Federal Reserve Bank — were rated excellent. The Crocker Bank tour was guided by an alumnus of the University of Nevada, Reno. Not only did the alumnus do an excellent job on the tour but answered several questions in detail. Many students said the best part of the Crocker Bank tour was seeing how loan officers evaluated loans. The visit to the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco was also rated high. The public relations person was quite knowledgeable; but the computer game, in which students played the role of the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, was the most enjoyable.

The San Francisco Produce Exchange visit was not rated as high as anticipated by the faculty. However, the low rating may have resulted from the time of the visit, which was around 4 a.m. One must arrive at the Produce Exchange early in the morning in order to witness the buying and selling of fresh produce. The Exchange is one of the last bastions of the free market in action, and we feel the students will gain a greater appreciation for the Exchange later in their careers.

The lowest rated tour was the Sun Maid Raisin tour. This was a "canned" public relations tour, led by a person not associated with the management of the company. Agribusiness and agricultural economics students wish to talk to the owners and/or operators of a firm to learn the details of their operation. Students found that a packaged public relations tour was uninformative. Next time, tour leaders will request that a plant manager give the tour or just skip it for an alternative visit.

The ratings of these tours reported in Table 1 may be biased by the experiences of the students. Many of the students come from ranches, dairies, or alfalfa farms, which may cause them to rate similar agribusiness firms higher. Experience with these agribusiness firms may cause students to have more interest and questions. If the tour guide is responsive to the students' questions, this tour will undoubtedly

Table 1. Rating of Establishments Visited During the Spring 1984 Field Trip.

Establishments Visited	-----Rating Scale-----				
	1 Very Poor	2	3 Good	4 Excellent	5 Very Excellent
Goerhing Meats Company			X		X
Simplot Chemical Plant				X	
Crocker Bank, Fresno				X	
Visit Dalry - Steve Maddox					X
Market News Service				X	
Harris Feedlot					X
Field Station - Five Points			X		
Riverbend Products, Inc.				X	
Sun Maid Raisins	X				
Kearney Field Station			X		
Wente Brothers				X	
S.F. Produce Exchange			X		
Federal Reserve B. S.F.				X	
Acres of Orchids		X			

receive a high rating. However, a tour of an agribusiness firm such as Acres and Orchids was rated lower because students on this tour were unfamiliar with business opportunities in horticulture. A goal of the agribusiness tour is to expose students to unfamiliar agribusiness firms such as Acres of Orchids. Later in their careers students will appreciate the visit.

After rating the agribusiness firms visited, students were asked to comment on certain aspects of the field trip. Their replies will be used to improve the field trip. Students unanimously said they much preferred an owner-operator giving a tour rather than a public relations person. Because owners and operators are close to the daily operations of the firm, they are most likely to give more informative tours and answer questions. As to preferences of an alumnus giving the tour, students were indifferent. However, some believed that the students and tour guide are more at ease if the tour guide is an alumnus. They also believed that the alumnus would more completely answer difficult questions and be less inhibited.

Students did have a preference for medium- and small-sized farms. They believed these firms would more likely have tour guides that were owners or operators of the firm rather than public relations people. Many students requested more pre-trip classes so that questions could be formulated before the trip started. This suggestion will be incorporated into the field trip next year. Some of the students would have liked the field trip to last longer, but this request must be weighed against higher costs. A longer trip with no additional agribusiness firms means students could visit an establishment longer, which was requested numerous times. As to the most enjoyable part of the field trip, replies ranged from enjoying seeing an alumnus with a job, learning what loan officers look for in a loan application, and the most prevalent comment was the ability to learn from a complete stranger.

Summary

Agribusiness and agricultural economics students enjoy seeing the complex tools and theories learned in their courses being used in the business world. The agribusiness field trip gives these students an avenue to observe successful agribusiness operations and question successful agribusiness owners and operators. Many components are necessary for a successful field trip, including an enthusiastic faculty tour leader, the possibilities of using an alumnus of your department in the field trip, and having only owner-operators lead tours of their facilities. The students in a post-trip questionnaire expressed their desire for owner-operator tours rather than public relations canned tours. Also, many students expressed surprise and enjoyment at learning from complete strangers. In addition, students requested a more intense pre-trip segment of the field trip. This will be initiated so that potential questions can be developed before the tour begins. Those enrolled for two credits may be required to do their paper prior to the trip. Given adequate pre-trip preparations, the tour becomes very enjoyable and fruitful.

References

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Financial Value Estimation As An Analogy to Breeding Value Estimation

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Breeding estimation for a single trait can be based on different sources of phenotypic information. This concept can be illustrated in diagram form as follows:

COLLATERAL RELATIVES

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ANCESTORS ↔ INDIVIDUAL ↔ PROGENY

where INDIVIDUAL has reference to the INDIVIDUAL whose breeding value is being estimated for a specific trait. In addition to information on the INDIVIDUAL, phenotypic information on relatives of

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