

# LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS IN AN AGRIBUSINESS CURRICULUM

Murray Hawkins and John Dymond

On February 28, 1991 a small group of talented academics was suddenly projected into the national academic spotlight in Australia, with the announcement by the "Bulletin" [Newsweek] magazine that their's was the top ranking program among agricultural faculties in Australia.

It would be a gross understatement to say that the shock waves through the old and well established faculties in Australia were profound and unsettling. Agricultural scientists from those universities which the selectors had ignored, heaped scorn upon the selection criteria and after a short temper tantrum, continued on their way towards producing excellent scientists for world class research establishments.<sup>1</sup>

The implications of the Bulletin rankings however, have a direct bearing on the survival of traditional agricultural tertiary education in Australia. The Muresk program was rated higher because it is based on innovative programs :

1. developed after considerable consultation with employers
2. that are applied in nature, so producing highly employable graduates
3. designed to instil communication abilities and qualities of leadership in the graduate
4. providing a unique blending of applied agricultural science subjects and business skills with a philosophy of entrepreneurship.

The rankings have thus led to a new order in Australian agricultural tertiary education.

In addition, the newly developing agribusiness faculties are cost effective in terms of the resources involved per student unit and are attracting large numbers of high school students to their programs. The signals are clear. The agricultural business economy needs and desires managers and leaders with a blending of education in applied agricultural science and business skills.

### Agribusiness Traditions

There have been successful Agribusiness programs for many years in the United States and Canada. Purdue University and the University of Guelph have amongst others, led the way. Traditionally their programs have developed within Faculties of Agriculture, and usually as an off shoot of Agricultural Economics courses.

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The development of agribusiness as a discrete discipline however, has not been universally accepted. Compulsory elements of Agricultural Science, including chemistry and biology, were historically inserted in order to keep the programs pure and disciplined, ie hard science at the expense of "soft" science. Usually the curriculum committees have been dominated by scientists and economists, with very few members who had graced the halls of business. Across the road, the Faculties of Business have been just as indifferent to the needs of Agriculture and Forestry, while proceeding on their parallel road to "white knighthood" by turning out "generalist" graduates who were of modest use to the agribusiness complex. Given with these two parents, the mix of curricula developed was designed to force the role of an agricultural scientist directly onto the back of a young entrepreneur. This imposition was likely to be difficult and usually not too successful.

Indeed, it has become apparent that in today's environment the successful agribusiness programs in Australia have had to move one step away from the two parents, in order to develop flexibility and credibility with agribusiness.

### In Summary

Traditional Agribusiness programs have thus been attempting to serve two masters. It has been a difficult road to travel. Agricultural programs based largely on science criteria are declining in their ability to enrol undergraduates, while business schools prosper. In addition, the role of social or "soft" sciences in the world of agricultural science continues to be misunderstood as agricultural science units continue to remove optional units from their programs as they drive for "pure" science. The world of the student's curriculum within Agricultural Economics fares little better, as the perceived need for quantitative analysis and advanced economic theory grows with all the enthusiasm of the voracious hydra.

The outcome of programs dominated by academic concerns and priorities is that the needs of agricultural commerce and rural society in general are often neglected, downgraded and considered by academic "purists" as being unworthy of higher academic study. The three "sisters" of academia; science, agricultural economics and business make sorrowful relatives for the developing discipline, representing as it does the applied field of agribusiness education.

1. None of the traditional university programs in agriculture were ranked in the top five programs by the business community.

## Educational Needs of Agribusiness<sup>2</sup>

Agribusiness, if defined in its broadest "paddock to plate" context, covers an enormous field. Educational needs therefore must be equivalently varied. However, surveys of agribusiness employers in the United States [Litzenberg and Schneider, 1988] and in Australia [Fairmie, Stanton and Dobbin, 1989] suggest that employers at least have a clear idea of where the energies of agribusiness educators should be directed.

From these studies it appears that the characteristics most sought after in the agribusiness manager are those in the area of interpersonal and communication skills. At the head of the list of characteristics that fall into this category are self motivation, a positive work attitude, high moral and ethical standards and the ability to work as part of a team. Developing these desired attitudinal characteristics in students is by no means easy. Fairmie et al [1989] have discussed the difficulty and indeed the desirability of attempting to do so by direct means. They do, however, suggest the value of indirect approaches, the use of role models and the positive reinforcement of desired behaviour. The instilling of these characteristics thus becomes a covert part of curricula goals.

### New Schools for Agribusiness Leaders

It is interesting to note again that all of the top five faculties in the Australian rankings came from schools where their roots were involved in practical applied farm management and marketing situation at the college level. All have had proven track records at this level and all have been merged with major universities.

Some like the University of New England have had world class agricultural faculties, and others have come from less distinguished roots.

Given the stability from merging with a major university but remaining a remote campus, colleges like Muresk have been quietly able to upgrade their staff and to experiment with their programs without the direct distraction of the "three sisters". Therefore it is perhaps a useful exercise to examine the Muresk program to see what makes it different and to see what lessons might be useful for agribusiness programs developing within the more traditional agricultural curriculum scene.

### The Muresk Experiment

We want to make it very clear from the start that the experiences at Muresk reflect no startling discoveries. It is just that the mix appears right for developing leaders in agribusiness with the necessary communication skills. Naturally we will only attempt to outline the conceptual framework of the program. Those who want details can contact us and we will be pleased to send them.

At Muresk, students in the Diploma and Degree programs undertake a common first year which has a strong emphasis on applied agriculture. Subjects studied include animal and

plant systems, blended with units covering communication, farm mechanisation, basic business principles and introductory farm management.

In the second year of the degree more emphasis is placed on business and management subjects. Students undertake a blend of accounting, economics, taxation, data evaluation, marketing and farm management. This is supplemented with some rural sociology, more communications and a series of optimal applied agriculture subjects.

In year three they proceed to Professional Practice, a sixteen week stint with an agribusiness, where, under the supervision of Muresk staff and their employer, they explore the realm of a line manager. Their major work is to prepare a management audit of the selected manager.

The final two semesters of the program involve rural policy, finance, labour science, marketing, law and agribusiness planning and still more optional applied agriculture subjects. During this period as well, they are involved in detailed preparation for a marketing plan competition, held by the Australian and New Zealand Agribusiness Association. Last year Muresk finished third.

Direct instruction in communication and in leadership development is deliberately limited. These important skills are encouraged and developed in all subjects; they covert program goals. One should note the absence of formal units in chemistry and senior economics.

All students are, however, thoroughly prepared in computers, spread sheets etc. There are in addition, numerous options available in wool technology, landcare, crop and animal production and many other areas to fill out their course.

The program is currently under review and increased economics and business statistical knowledge is likely to be inserted.

### Conclusion

The majority of the approximately 400 undergraduates at Muresk are from the rural areas of Western Australia. They are usually naive and unworldly in the best sense of the word. Most come from a mixed background of private schools and rural high schools, where academic standards are high on one hand, and at best uneven on the other. They are practical, unsophisticated and usually more mature students than those who proceed to the University of Western Australia. Many choose, and are encouraged by Muresk, to work a year in the agricultural industry before starting their tertiary education at Muresk.

Muresk feels an obligation to educate those who are committed to agriculture. Where the university's general policies on admission prevent the entry to Muresk of such committed applicants who have underachieved at secondary school, then Muresk offer a special "bridging" course to cover academic deficiencies in these potential students.

To blend these two streams of students into leaders for society and agribusiness is a daunting task.

The strength of the Muresk program, as indeed, it is with the University of Western Australia, is that each institution knows its market and directs its efforts and programs to meet

2. This section is as presented by Dymond and Hawkins in a paper prepared for the First International Agribusiness Conference at Harvard University in Cambridge Massachusetts in March 1991.

# The Care and Feeding of a College Teacher

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There are a number of dimensions that need to be accounted for when one thinks about the care and feeding of the college teacher. Adult development perspectives need to be taken into account, and also, career development concepts as we look at the "professoriate". The professoriate needs to be viewed as a total and it is specifically influenced by the institution within which we work. Roles that the professoriate must assume include teacher, scholar, researcher, extension specialist and service. The overall issue when one looks at the developing teacher is being able to blend together these perspectives and avoid what appears to be a very common phenomenon in the professoriate and that is career plateauing or even burnout. It is my contention that we tend to see more career burnout among college teachers than we see in other parts of the role of the professoriate.

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its own areas of concern. Under separate administrations the programs are not forced to make the necessary accommodations that would be necessary if they were in one faculty. The worlds of science, agricultural economics and business have not proven that they can develop an integrated independent program that is capable of providing the leaders that rural society and agribusiness needs. Applied agricultural science with Business education and application molded in a non-threatening atmosphere are the tools needed to develop the leaders in agribusiness for tomorrow.

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One must examine the state of affairs at each institution when asking the question, "What do you do for the care and feeding of the college teacher?" The question needs to be raised, "Is there a faculty development planning process and is there a set of existing structure and processes that would facilitate personal and professional growth?" Based on the situation of analyzing our institution, it appeared that there were voids in the area of teaching development and voids associated with bridging the individual and unit goals and objectives. Further, there seemed to be a very laissez-faire approach rather than an intrusive approach to developing teachers, and there was very little evidence of any structured process for faculty development. I challenge each of you to take time to reexamine the state of affairs as you look at your own campus and apply it to your unit or department level.

Based on the assessment that I made at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln within the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I concluded that there were very few intrusive and structured processes as related to the care and feeding of the college teacher. Therefore as Dean, I set into motion a process which built upon what was there and visibly reflected an institutional commitment. This has been an evolutionary process which needs to be a campus decision to intentionally establish a faculty development planning process and action plan. Within the last two years, we have established in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources an Office of Professional and Organizational Development (OPOD), and we have a coordinator who heads professional and organizational development planning working with the Dean of Instruction, Research and Extension and the department heads and faculty.

## Making the Nurturing Visible

The course of events in the evolution of our faculty development program for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources grew out of the commitment at the Resident Instruction level (College of Agriculture). There has been a traditional interest and commitment for effectiveness of the classroom instructor. The College of Agriculture (now College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources), has had a history of high ratings by students as being a college that was concerned about effective teaching with caring faculty both in the classroom and as advisors. The climate for nurturing the teaching faculty has existed for a good long while. However, there was little visible commitment from the college point-of-view or the Dean's Office.

A specific paradigm shift was the first step associated