The Future of Land Grant Universities and Their Colleges of Agriculture

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WILL ROGERS once said that “a conference is just an admission that you want somebody to join you in your troubles.” Some people are saying that we do have troubles—that the sky seems to be falling on the future of agriculture in land grant universities.

I’ve been reflecting upon the important challenges facing land grant universities for some time. New developments in research, education, and professional service put the future in a slightly different light, and some of these developments provide a dramatically different perspective and new directions for the future.

Taken as a whole, what has happened to land grant universities and their colleges of agriculture is what cultural anthropologists call a revitalization movement. There has been a fundamental transformation in land grant universities, from a traditional agriculture base to high technology. The agricultural sciences have played a major role in bringing about this transformation.

If we take advantage of our strengths, all this ferment will propel the agricultural sciences into the forefront of collegiate disciplines, such as they were when land grant universities were established over 120 years ago.

Let’s take a quick glance at some aspects of our changing society that affect the new directions and revitalization movements within land grant universities.

When land grant universities were established, agriculture provided the dominant occupation. Today, however, overwhelming numbers of workers are employed in what Peter Drucker called our information-based or knowledge-based society.

When the information industry began to dawn in the early 1960s, various futurists were saying that our biggest problem in 20 years was going to be the management of our leisure time. There were even Senate hearings at the time predicting that because of computers and robotics we would be working 24-hour weeks, 27 weeks a year, and that we would be under stress from hours and hours of empty leisure time.

What happened? We are in fact working longer average days than we did in the 1960s, and the products and processes of our information-based industry have contributed to that in great measure. All that information needed to be managed—and it took time.

I think the situation in agriculture today is somewhat similar. There is a tendency to say, “we have solved the problem; we can produce what we need and more. We have fewer people. There will be less work. There is less need.” Reality, I think, will be different. In many ways, our information-based society has put us in the position of knowing too much and understanding too little.

David Pearce Snyder, who is a highly regarded futurist, J. Prod. Agric., Vol. 3, no. 3, 1990 261 Published April 18, 2013