Celebrating 150 Years of Excellence in Agriculture at Iowa State

**Essays on the College of Agriculture's History**

**Agricultural Business**

By Paul Doak, associate professor emeritus, economics

*Editor’s note: Paul Doak served Iowa State University for 30 years as a faculty member of the agricultural economics (agricultural business) department from 1962-1992. He writes about his experience as a graduate student at Iowa State and the beginning of the agricultural business department boom.*

As an undergraduate student at the University of Missouri, I was familiar with some of the work of Iowa State University professors Earl Heady, Geoffrey Shepherd and William Murray from class assignments concerning their studies and the mention of their names by instructors.

In 1956, I heard Professor Elmer Kiehl, who would later become dean of Agriculture at the University of Missouri, discuss Iowa State’s efforts to develop a curriculum in agricultural business. Also in April of that year, I had occasion to drive through the campus when the redbud and dogwood trees were in full bloom and thought if I ever went to graduate school, Iowa State was where I would to go.   
              
In February 1960, I applied for admission to graduate school and in three days I had a call from Professor John Nordin offering an assistantship under Professor Richard Phillips. A unit in Pammel Court was reserved for me if I wanted it. I accepted and about three days later I was enrolled and had an address of 1052 Pammel Court. I was assigned a desk in a room of Ag Annex which would later be renamed East Hall.  
              
In February 1962, Professor J.T. Scott approached me and asked if I was interested in sitting through Econ 492 (now Econ 292) and Econ 335 and developing course outlines. He also had me give three lectures in Econ 335. Professor Lehman Fletcher was scheduled to teach Econ 335 in the summer of 1962, but he had a foreign assignment and I taught the class instead. Later, Professor Scott went to Peru and I taught Econ 492 and Econ 335.

Sometime in April 1962, I encountered Professor Ray Beneke in the first floor hallway of Ag Annex. We had a friendly discussion and ended up sitting on the front step of the building enjoying the sunshine, the scenery and the passing students. Professor Beneke carried loose pipe tobacco in his suit coat pocket and he reached in to get a small chew. I said I would take some and he held his pocket open. He casually quizzed me on my undergraduate experiences and my impression of the undergraduate teaching and advising at the University of Missouri. He then offered the opportunity to participate in the advising of agricultural business students, which I accepted. A vacancy in the advising ranks had occurred as Professor Randall Hoffman left on a foreign assignment to Argentina.

Professor John Timmons was responsible for originating the Peru project. It offered many opportunities for tenured staff, graduate students who were involved in the research projects and those graduate students who were not involved could fill the void in the department. Looking back I realize I was being interviewed by Professor Beneke on the front steps and by Professor Scott when I was making course outlines.  
              
The enrollment in the agricultural business curriculum was about 200-250 students at the end of the 1961-1962 school year. It steadily grew to about 700 at its peak in 1980 and was the largest curriculum in the College. I believe the growth and success of the program was due to the quality of the graduates and the desire of agribusiness firms to hire employees with knowledge of agriculture to develop into mid- and upper-level management.  
              
Professor Scott had initiated a modest intern project with Quaker Oats and Felco at Fort Dodge. Felco later merged with Land O’Lakes. Professor Beneke developed an intern program with banks that later expanded to include the Farmers Home Administration and the Farm Credit Administration. The first internships were for the summer. Later internships became available for any quarter and the number of sponsors grew. Credit was offered for these experiences under Econ 190. Students were required to write a paper of their experiences and do a study of interest for their employer. These internships were not only of immense value to the participant but helped faculty to become better acquainted with sponsors and student participants spread the word on campus among other students.

John Walther, a member of Agricultural Business Club, organized the club’s first Spring Trip, which occurred between winter quarter and spring quarter of 1963. John was well acquainted with Chicago and that was our destination. When we finally arrived a few of the firms and institutions we visited were the Chicago Board of Trade, Continental Illinois Bank, Chicago and Northwestern Railway and the Midwest Stock Exchange. Very few students had ever been to Chicago, so it was quite an event. The trip was a very successful venture and it has become an annual event with a different city being visited each year.  
              
In 1969, the Ag Council decided to initiate an Agricultural Career Day, which was held during the fall quarter. It had poor attendance and Ag Council decided not to hold another due to a lack of interest. Jerry Gidel and Darwin Luedtke, leaders in the Agricultural Business Club, came to me to express their disappointment and they believed they could do better having learned from the mistakes of the Ag Council. We decided that the Agricultural Business Club should sponsor an event as a service project for the College. College administrators approved the plan.

The event was held in the fairly wide hallways of the first and second floors of Curtiss Hall. At that time Curtiss Hall was a pedestrian freeway between the east and the west side of campus. Many agriculture students passed through Curtiss Hall several times a day — making it a prime location. About 25 of the most active recruiters were invited to have a small booth or table at the event. The affair was an instant success due to the efforts of Jerry and Darwin. The state fire marshal eventually closed down the Curtiss Hall operation and it was it was moved to the combined space of the Great Hall and the Sun Room of the Union. Currently, nearly 150 firms have representatives with students coming from other area colleges to participate. It was the efforts of Jerry and Darwin who spawned the event and laid the basic format, which ensured its success and perpetuity.

The enrollment in the agricultural business curriculum eventually began to decline due to several reasons. One reason, I believe, was the development of the business college, which was originally a part of the department of economics and sociology and was called industrial administration. The industrial administration group was moved to facilities separate from the rest of the department. The formal structure gradually evolved until the industrial administration group was free standing and grew into the business college. The Department of Economics has always been supportive of its growth and development.

I took early retirement at ISU in 1992 because of multiple health concerns, some of which were longstanding. It was a real privilege to be a member of the department. I cherish my experiences with students, the staff and my colleagues.