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Redefining goals and priorities

For more than a century, the University and the people of California have engaged in a unique, beneficial partnership for the development of natural resources and agriculture. The results have been impressive by any standard.

Like any partnership, however, this one between the colleges of agriculture, Agricultural Experiment Station, Cooperative Extension, and the people for whom these institutions were created requires continuing redefinition and renewal to remain in accord with changing times. Keeping in mind the basic missions of the University to create and disseminate knowledge, the partnership must be constantly alert to new needs and opportunities as they evolve both from the advancement of knowledge itself and from social, economic, and institutional changes.

Agriculture of the 1980s and that in prospect for the twenty-first century are vastly different from that which existed when the land-grant university system came into being more than a century ago. The 14 percent of our farms that today account for three-fourths of U.S. agricultural production are science-driven, highly capitalized businesses. At the other extreme are nearly 70 percent of the farms, relatively small in scale, which account for less than 10 percent of agricultural production and whose owners depend on off-farm employment for much of their income. In reality, agriculture is now a very heterogeneous sector with differing needs for, and differing capacities to use, technology and information flowing from our universities.

Perhaps the most striking and significant change is the high degree of interdependence of agriculture and other sectors. Many of the inputs used in farming are now produced off the farm. Growers now face intense, direct competition from other sectors in the use of capital, labor, land, and water resources. They are increasingly dependent on foreign markets to absorb the products that have come from increased productivity. National and international economic policies that influence interest rates and foreign exchange rates have pervasive, direct influence on economic conditions in the farm sector. Many rural communities are no longer dominated by agriculture, but are instead mixed economies of industrial, service, and urban-related activities.

In short, the assumptions of uniqueness and relative economic insularity of agriculture and rural communities upon which many of our institutions and public policies were based have been seriously eroded. Our research and extension programs must now encompass much broader, more complex subject matter and the interests of numerous groups with claims on resources used by agriculture.

There are those who say that land-grant universities have lost their vision and their capacity for innovation and leadership in this complex new environment of interdependence; that emphasis on basic, disciplinary-oriented research has undermined the traditional land-grant commitment to applied and mission-oriented research. Others see adverse trends in the changing character of teaching programs in the colleges of agriculture and natural resources and a diminished responsiveness to our traditional clientele. There is also concern about the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension in the transfer and adaptation of knowledge to local needs, in the development of institutions and leadership at the local level, and as a conduit between the campus and the community.

Such allegations can be easily overdrawn, but we cannot ignore them. One thing is clear: the complexity and rapidity of change affecting agriculture and natural resources have greatly complicated planning and have created new challenges in both research and extension.

If we are to retain the spirit and the principles that led to the creation of land-grant universities and assist in the future development of agriculture and the use of natural resources, we must continue to re-examine our goals and priorities. We must maintain excellence in our programs ranging across the continuum from fundamental and basic research, to mission-oriented and applied research, to the extension and application of knowledge at the local level. But we must be realistic. Program resources will continue to be limited. Choices and program adjustments will have to be made, bearing in mind our responsibilities as a land-grant university and our comparative advantages in relation to other institutions, public and private.

Just as the University must plan for facilities, faculty, and curriculum to meet the needs of future students, so should the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources have a strategic plan to guide us. That plan should begin with an assessment of potential development paths for agriculture and natural resources in the next decade or two. Out of that assessment should grow a statement of long-term research and extension needs and priorities. In turn, that statement should become a basis to guide program development, secure necessary public support, and guide resource allocation decisions.

The University and the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources have proud traditions of excellence and public service. As incoming Vice President, I look forward to maintaining and furthering those traditions.