



A Report by the Maryland Farm Bureau
Workgroup for University of Maryland College
of Agriculture and Natural Resources/Extension

August 4, 2015

College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

The following are the opinions and recommendations of the Maryland Farm Bureau University of Maryland Workgroup, as approved by the MFB Board of Directors, regarding the University of Maryland College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at College Park and UMES.

Research/Funding

The research area within the University must be reviewed and reorganized.

The College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (AGNR) must receive dedicated, independent research funding from the University. Researchers should not be beholden to grant funding or “automatic administrative overhead.” These hurdles are discouraging agribusinesses from working with the University. Researchers should have discretionary funding to study issues important to agricultural improvement.

Leading researchers are not coming to or staying at the University of Maryland (UMD) due to a lack of financial resources offered from the University system and state/federal budget. The agriculture community invests heavily with funds from check-off programs, but recently Maryland commodity groups have sent funds to researchers in other states. These funds are not going to Maryland researchers because UMD does not have sufficient faculty to conduct the research needed for production agriculture.

Applied research must be balanced with basic research. Adequate ongoing research in the area of nutrient management must be conducted in order for farmers to do the best possible job. Maryland farmers are required by law to use the UMD recommendations. If they are not updated regularly, farmers are forced to use antiquated recommendations. For example, soil scientists are greatly needed to conduct research related to the Phosphorus Management Tool (PMT).

Politics have also been too intrusive in research targets. Outcomes desired by elected officials have steered research funding and focus. Too much emphasis is placed on non-traditional options, such as specialty crops, organics and CSAs. Soil scientists have been pressured by political agendas and have left AGNR to seek less stressful positions with more freedom to conduct solid research.

Recruitment/Admissions

The admission requirements within AGNR must be more conducive to Maryland high school seniors. In recent years, AGNR has pursued a singular focus on academic excellence in the admissions process, leading to the elimination of many fine, well-rounded applicants who would have made outstanding students and graduates. The admissions process must be modified to consider factors other than academics, such as extracurricular activities and leadership involvement, to produce outstanding students of AGNR.

AGNR must actively recruit students at high schools, particularly concentrating on students involved in FFA and 4-H programs. A strategic partnership with both FFA and 4-H should be developed to advise students on taking the proper high school courses, campus visits, active recruitment and possible scholarships.

AGNR used to actively work with prospective employers to make sure graduates had jobs at the end of the program. It is more difficult for AGNR to do this now because researchers are not studying the issues important to for-profit businesses and students are not exposed to those job opportunities. The college still needs to pursue these prospective employers and encourage internship opportunities for the students.

There are countless opportunities for AGNR to better market itself to prospective high school students in Maryland. AGNR should promote and exploit its proximity to the Chesapeake Bay, the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and Washington, D.C. AGNR could also develop a slogan and logo to promote the fact that Maryland is on the leading edge of environmental protection and resource conservation in agriculture, for example, "Where agriculture and the environment come together."

Courses/Programs

There are certain areas of study that any highly respected, top quality agricultural college must offer. These include the full spectrum of agricultural commodities, including but not limited to Agronomy, Horticulture, Animal Science, Poultry Science and Dairy Science. The Department of Agronomy is a vital area in every agricultural college and must be restored at AGNR.

AGNR has shown a lack of appreciation for and emphasis on production agriculture. This has manifested itself through its shortcomings in funding, staffing, allocation of resources, course offerings and recruitment. While many new farms are non-traditional, the bulk of revenue generated from the industry will continue to come from traditional production agriculture. AGNR needs to create more production agriculture majors with classes in each subject area to keep up with competing agriculture colleges. The college should also place emphasis on the benefits of studying those subjects because production agriculture is the leading economic driver of Maryland and reflects the land grant institution philosophy.

AGNR's agriculture technology program needs to be enhanced. Maryland is situated in the perfect location to meet the demand for new and advanced technologies with the Chesapeake Bay, Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and Washington D.C.

The college needs to find the agriculture side of environmental sciences. Students should value saving farms as part of serving the world. The environmental focus over the last decade has been anti-farming. Many believe the PMT work was corrupted by environmental groups with an agenda rather than driven by pure science. AGNR needs to change the way it perceives farming and the practices Maryland farmers have implemented to protect the environment.

Faculty and Staff

AGNR should hire professionals who have the ability to instruct students, conduct research and provide extension delivery.

Vacant positions within the College must be filled, particularly those associated with production agriculture majors and applied research.

In the past, Maryland had very good researchers who worked with farmers to conduct research and deliver results. As retirements occur, new hires must bring the same attitude and aptitude of hands-on, in-the-field work, rather than theoretical in-the-lab research.

Partnerships

AGNR should develop better relationships with prospective employers in the agriculture industry. Students should be exposed to employment opportunities while at college and employers should have input in curriculum development so faculty can correctly train the students to meet the employer's needs.

Potential opportunities to develop public/private partnerships should be identified and developed. Partners should include commodity groups, major agribusinesses and local farms. Such efforts could leverage private dollars to increase funding of certain departments, offer curriculum suggestions, mentoring, internships, commitment to prioritize hiring graduates, and restricted scholarships.

A strategic partnership with 4-H and FFA, as previously mentioned under Recruitment, should be developed to prepare students for college admission and encourage their application to UMD and the college of AGNR.

Given the proximity of the College Park campus to the USDA Beltsville facility, serious consideration should be given to developing a cooperative agreement to allow students to receive practical training and conduct research at this facility. This partnership could lead to internships, research and future employment for the students of AGNR.

University of Maryland Extension

We believe that Extension through UMD's College of AGNR is absolutely critical to the agriculture community as a source of independent, third party, unbiased information. The following are the opinions and recommendations of the Maryland Farm Bureau UMD Workgroup, as approved by the MFB Board of Directors, regarding Extension.

Extension Operation

Extension positions through AGNR must be reorganized to employ more individuals as county agents and specialists. Every county should have at least one agricultural Extension Agent whose primary role is to educate the farmers in his/her county. The current organizational structure utilizing Area Extension Directors (AED) is unnecessary and the positions should be eliminated. The positions waste valuable and limited resources that should be used to fund agent and specialist positions. The AEDs are not securing funding for local extension operations from county elected officials because of disconnect between the AED and officials. UMD should bring back the County Extension Director position in place of the AED.

A statewide Extension Advisory Committee (Council) should be established to advise the Dean and Director of Extension. Representation from major commodity groups and stakeholders should be a priority.

The morale among Extension staff is at an all-time low and must be remedied. Extension Agents and specialists should have more input into how Extension operates and more freedom to individualize their activities as circumstances in their county dictate. Extension Agents also should not have to use personal funds to attend conferences and workshops that improve their ability to work with farmers. These funds must be made available for continued education and conference participation.

Role of Extension Agent

Because of the unique economics and structure of the farm community, most farmers cannot afford to conduct extensive independent research and must rely on others for this information. Extension Agents should be expected to offer unbiased research and facts to their county farmers by working one-on-one with the farmers to achieve better overall results.

Currently, Extension Agents are overwhelmed with administrative duties, required to conduct group meetings primarily and are discouraged from working one-on-one with farmers. Extension Agents should concentrate on individual farmer needs and enhance partnerships with agribusiness and commodity groups in the community. Agents should deliver cutting-edge research results and technology as well as solutions for day-to-day farm concerns.

While there is a growing number of farms and farmers pursuing nontraditional agriculture, traditional wholesale commodity agriculture will continue to produce most of the revenue in Maryland and must not be neglected or ignored in the role of the Extension Agent.

Extension should continue to provide resources and leadership in the areas of youth development and 4-H, nutrient management, new and beginning farmer training and research into Best Management Practices. AGNR should continue to support Extension Agents who educate non-farmers about where their food comes from and what is happening to the land farmed around them. This is vital for continued positive farm practices and an appreciation of the value of those practices by the public.

Budget

A general re-allocation of Extension funding is necessary to provide for at least one county agent in each county and to provide the “boots on the ground” delivery of information to farmers. There should also be one grant writer at the University level to help all Extension personnel perfect their grant writing capabilities.

The funding equation within the University system should not penalize AGNR or Extension by counting Extension personnel in the student/teacher ratio for the purposes of determining how much funding is needed.

There should be a specific line item in the state budget for Extension. There should also be more transparency in the University budgeting process.

“Cooperative” Extension

In order to reflect the true meaning of “cooperative” extension as outlined in the Smith-Lever Act, UMD should add the word “cooperative” back into the name of the program. This will emphasize the cooperative effort between USDA, University of Maryland and the county government.

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