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Planting the Legal Seed: The Benefit of Agricultural Law Education for Extension Professionals

Ryan Conklin

Graduate Student

Department of Agricultural Education and Communication

rconklin@ufl.edu

Michael Olexa

Professor and Director

University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Center for Agricultural and Natural Resource Law

Department of Food and Resource Economics

olexa@ufl.edu

University of Florida

Gainesville, Florida

Abstract: *Agriculture is one of the most heavily regulated industries in the United States. Government oversight, increased litigation, legal and policy issues that demand careful analysis, and a multitude of legal complexities have created a need for Extension professionals to better understand this complicated regulatory environment. To address this need, the University of Florida has implemented two curriculum adjustments in the last decade. Past studies discussing legal education and Extension have been included along with potential recommendations for the Cooperative Extension Service.*

Introduction

The legal complexities and regulations surrounding agriculture are unparalleled by any other sector in the United States economy (Olexa, Fairchild, Wysocki, & Weldon,

2003). Agricultural law education is critical in equipping future Extension professionals with timely and appropriate information for framing and implementing environmentally sound, socially acceptable, and economically feasible agricultural practices in the production of food, fuel, and fiber. To accomplish this, land-grant institutions must adapt their academic curricula accordingly. In the last decade, the University of Florida has implemented two academic program adjustments to provide future Extension agents and specialists with professional skills in agricultural law. First, the history of legal education in Extension must be examined.

Linking Legal Education and Extension

Prior research studies indicate Extension professionals could better serve their constituents by expanding their legal knowledge base. Bazen and Bowling (2007) found that 75% of Tennessee farmers reported their county Extension agent as the source they would most likely contact about new or changing laws or regulations. Williams (1996) surveyed Wisconsin farm families and found that legal assistance was identified as one of their top five continuing needs. Williams (1996) also suggested Extension professionals could rectify the situation by offering a combination of law-related workshops, personal counseling sessions, and print and video resources. If Extension professionals are going to aid farmers in this manner, they must first have a sound legal foundation.

In past manuscripts, Extension researchers and practitioners have emphasized the legal education of agents and specialists through workshops and professional development programs. Balcom (2004) outlined a plan of action if Extension professionals are called for third-party testimony in lawsuits. Lambarth (2002) described an author-led program in which Extension professionals in rural Washington developed dispute mediation skills. In 1994, West Virginia University Extension leaders developed and distributed a series of initiatives to help county Extension offices implement the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (McBreen, 1994). These programs have successfully educated Extension professionals on relevant legal concerns through informal means. However, in order to achieve the level of legal expertise required to deliver consistent, reliable information, universities must employ more formal education methods through the revision of academic majors and minors.

Creation of the Undergraduate Minor in Agricultural and Natural Resource Law

Nowadays, agricultural professionals must make decisions that require in-depth analysis of law, regulations, and statutes (Hamilton, 1999). Traditionally, land-grant institutions have offered few courses in agricultural law. However, the 21st century agricultural work environment necessitates curricula designed to assemble, interpret, and present information on laws, regulations, and policy issues; inform students about the policy making process; and educate students about the laws and administrative regulations that reflect past policy decisions. To address this educational need, the University of Florida launched the nation's first undergraduate minor in agricultural and natural resource law.

Since its inception in 1999, over 200 students have completed the minor. The curriculum (Table 1) consists of six credit hours of core classes and nine elective credit hours. Based on student exit and alumni interviews, the minor has increased employment prospects and has benefitted graduates both personally and professionally.

Table 1.

The Agricultural and Natural Resource Law Minor Curriculum,
University of Florida

Class Type	Course Number	Title	Credit Hours
Core (6 credits)	AEB 4123	Agricultural and Natural Resource Law	3
	AEB 4085	Agricultural Risk Management and the Law	3
Electives (9 credits)	AEB 4126	Agriculture and Natural Resource Ethics	3
	AEB 4424	Human Resource Management	3
	FNR 4660C	Natural Resource Policy and Administration	3
	AEB 4242	International Trade Policy	3
	AEB 4283	International Development Policy	3

	BUL 4310	The Legal Environment of Business	4
	FOS 4731	Government Regulation and Food	2
Additional Electives to be Determined			

Agricultural Law Course Inclusion Within the Doctor of Plant Medicine Program

The University of Florida's second curriculum revision came from the Doctor of Plant Medicine (DPM) program. The DPM program was established in 1999 with the purpose of training plant doctors to serve agriculture by providing rapid, accurate, and scientifically sound diagnoses and management strategies for a variety of plant health problems. Dr. Robert McGovern, former DPM program director, assisted in the progression of over 50 program graduates during his tenure. His comments from a personal interview accentuate the importance of agricultural and natural resource law education.

Dr. McGovern stated that "law is an important component in education and can provide a diverse set of professional options for graduates" (personal communication, 2011). When asked if he believed a background in agricultural and natural resource law enhanced the ability of DPM graduates to better serve as Extension agents or specialists, Dr. McGovern answered with a resounding "yes" (personal communication, 2011). In closing, Dr. McGovern declared, "if students from other academic programs wish to be in real-world situations in an agricultural context, then agricultural law is certainly relevant" (personal communication, 2011).

Dr. Mark Mossler, a 2005 graduate of the DPM program, was interviewed via email. Dr. Mossler has spent 20 years in the field working with several different government agencies. (personal communication, 2011) Dr. Mossler believes that any law course that addresses the administrative process is advantageous for current and future DPM graduates (personal communication, 2011).

Recommendations for Extension

Holt (1989) discusses managing change in Extension and specifically encourages Extension administrators to capitalize on the system's strengths while identifying tomorrow's niches (Holt, 1989). Capitalizing on undergraduate, graduate, and professional legal education constitutes such a niche. Producers, rural residents,

private companies, and public officials are among the groups that would benefit greatly from having access to agents and specialists with an understanding of agricultural law.

Extension agents and specialists face a growing and critical need to expand their knowledge of law and policy. According to Olexa, Fairchild, Wysocki, and Weldon (2003), college-of-agriculture graduates lack adequate knowledge about laws, regulations, and policies affecting their newfound profession. While it may have previously been possible for college-of-agriculture graduates to thrive without such expertise, this is no longer the case. Almost all education methods used to teach legal concepts to Extension professionals in the past have been informal in nature. To adequately prepare the next group of Extension agents and specialists, land-grant universities must immediately evaluate how to incorporate legal education in academic curricula. Doing so would yield a better-rounded group of Extension professionals who are ready to meet the challenges of a complicated agricultural legal climate.

Conclusions

Overall, the benefits for the Extension system could be far-reaching if undergraduate and graduate students are able to enhance their knowledge of agricultural and natural resource law. Extension agents and specialists within the land-grant system would be better prepared professionals and more effective participants in the industry if legal education were a standard element of agricultural curricula.

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