A Critique of Agricultural Systems Management-Related Industry Perceptions of Knowledge & Skill Needs for Beginning Managers in West Texas

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The pendulum continues to swing! The question of whether our colleges and universities should turn out generalists or specialists is revisited in this timely research. As several of our teacher education programs, especially in Texas, struggle with this issue, these researchers have provided us some much-needed food for thought regarding the technical knowledge and skills needed by beginning managers.

The researchers provided a concise theoretical framework that guides the reader to a clearer understanding of the problem. The purpose and objectives delineated the problem even further. I noted in objective two the researchers did not include food or feed manufacturers, although they do specifically mention packing plants. I wondered if perhaps this was a purposeful omission due to vastly different knowledge and skills needed for food and feed industry positions?

In the methodology, the researchers explained their stratification techniques to ensure proportional representation. They also provided a well-developed summary of the instrumentation process. Table 1 was especially useful in helping the reader understand the knowledge and skills being assessed. Data analysis procedures were outlined, based on recognized research methodology.

The researchers summarized the various demographic variables in easily read text format. The tables organized by business type allowed the reader to compare the different areas and to quickly see the similarities between business types. One can promptly note the perceived importance of customer service and general math skills to almost every business type.

In their conclusions, the researchers pointed out the high level of importance general knowledge and skills had for beginning managers. They also noted the managers believed there were certain specific knowledge and skill areas a beginning manager should have, depending on the business type. As an educator, I wonder where this leaves the pendulum? The researchers recommend a more generalist approach at both the secondary and collegiate level, with greater emphasis on customer service skills and general math skills. In a highly specialized world, I wonder if these findings are ahead or behind the pendulum? Regardless, there are implications within this research for the necessity of looking at our secondary curriculum, not only in agriculture, but also in every other Career and Technology program. Additionally there are implications for not only Ag Mechanics, Ag Systems, and Ag Engineering curriculum design, but also for the way we as teacher educators prepare pre-service teachers.

Once again, I want to commend the researchers for a timely study and for adding to the body of knowledge regarding the generalist vs. the specialist paradigm.