

A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN AGRICULTURAL AND EXTENSION EDUCATION

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Many academic institutions are beginning to realize that much can be learned from former students. Follow-up studies show administrators the importance of discovering the needs of students and of evaluating the program of the institution. Follow-up studies are commonly used to evaluate the effectiveness of the academic institution's program. The results of such studies can be used to avoid mistakes and improve performances in the future (Erickson, 1947).

Follow-up studies of students often seek to measure the relationship between the training the students received at the institution and the expertise needed for their occupational placement. This is usually done by seeking judgments from the former students (Reich, 1973). The follow-up study is then concerned with what has happened to the former students, what influences the institution may have had upon them, occupational difficulties former students had in obtaining or keeping their job, strengths and weaknesses of their former educational institution, and their recommendations for improvements at the institution (Bledsoe, 1972). If the feedback indicates areas where improvements are needed, then program innovations and modification are developed. Finding out where we have some deficiencies will greatly enhance our probability of succeeding in future years (Peterson, 1971). To implement the findings into the educational system so that the future students are better trained than their predecessors, is one of the objectives of the follow-up effort. It cannot be denied that conducting such follow-up research and interpreting the results is a difficult task; nevertheless, the time, work, and effort become highly rewarding as new long range goals are set and new curricular changes are made where needed. The program is geared to provide educational opportunities to those students who are enrolled (Gilli, 1975).

It has been established that a follow-up study is a valuable technique for providing informative data to training institutions which can be utilized in improving the various aspects of the current program. No educational or training institution should be stalemated due to the lack of current data on their former graduates (Tayler, 1977).

The Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, Mississippi State University (MSU), is committed to providing efficient and effective education at the doctoral level. The Doctor of Education degree (Ed.D.), with an area of program emphasis in Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE), serves the needs of persons employed in leadership positions in AEE (Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, 1978). Since 1981, students in the U.S. and from foreign countries have graduated and received the Ed.D. degree from the Department of AEE, MSU.

To increase the ability to produce more effective graduates, the faculty needs information from alumni. Such information is needed as one means of determining the relevancy of the theory and techniques presented in the training program to actual practical conditions and situations (Nelson, 1955).

Through the follow-up study of graduates, the department may learn its own successes, strengths and weaknesses, and possibly gain insight from these former students for curriculum improvements as well as other needed information. The information contained in this study may be of value in assisting the administration of the Department of AEE in formulating new policies or in supporting those already in existence. The instructors in the Department of AEE may obtain information from this study to use in the development of new or more effective methods and techniques to be used in their instruction. The basic data may serve as a source of information for more effective advisement and guidance of the AEE students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine how doctoral students, who graduated from 1981-1986, evaluate their doctoral study experiences in the Department of AEE, MSU. Specifically, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the current occupations of these graduates?
2. How satisfied are these graduates with their doctoral programs?

3. To what extent did the contents of the courses in the doctoral program contribute to their success in developing and performing their current jobs?
4. Were the programs of study adequate to improve their competencies in performing their current jobs?
5. What were the strengths of their doctoral programs?

Procedure

The design of this study was descriptive survey research (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1985) which involved a census regarding the perceptions of the doctoral graduates from 1981 to 1986 in the Department of AEE, MSU. A list with addresses of all graduates was obtained from the Department of AEE, MSU. Thirteen of the graduates were working in the U.S., three were working in Thailand, and one graduate was working in Jordan. The population was investigated one time without making comparisons.

The instrument used in this evaluation consisted of a two page questionnaire eliciting responses of graduates. The questionnaire contained multiple choice items, Likert-type scale items, and open response items designed to secure data needed to complete the evaluation. Data were collected via a mail questionnaire. A cover letter, the questionnaire, and a self-addressed return envelope were mailed to each member of the population on April 18, 1988.

Findings

Fifteen of 17 questionnaires were completed and returned to the investigator by May 15, 1988. This produced a return rate of 88.24%. Thirteen respondents were from the U. S. and two respondents were from Thailand.

Current occupation of the respondents : The occupation of the respondents, as shown in Table 1, have been grouped under three headings. The first group consists of the educational positions held by the respondents as professor or teacher in educational institutions. The second group includes the administrative positions held by the respondents. The last group consists of positions held by the respondents other than teaching or administrative positions.

Most of the respondents (60%) indicated that they were teaching in institutions of higher education. The next largest number of respondents (26.8%) were in administrative positions.

Table 1
Current Occupation of the Respondents

Occupation	<u>N</u>	%
Teaching position		
Assistant Professor	5	33.3
Associate Professor of Ag Ed	3	20.0
Teaching Adults	1	6.7
Total	9	60.0
Administrative position		
Department Leader	1	6.7
Chairman of Agriculture Department	1	6.7
Leader of Computer Services	1	6.7
District Program Leader	1	6.7
Total	4	26.8^a
Other		
College Farm Coordinator	1	6.7
Truck Driver (Owner-Operator)	1	6.7
Total	2	13.4^b

Note. ^{a,b} The percentage column totals 100.2% because of rounding.

Satisfaction of the respondents with the doctoral program: None of the respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the doctoral program. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated they were very satisfied and three (20%) indicated they were satisfied. These data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Satisfaction of Respondents with the Doctoral Program

Occupation	Very Satisfied		Satisfied	
	<u>N</u>	%	<u>N</u>	%
Teaching Position	7	46.7	2	13.3
Administrative Position	4	26.7	-	-
Other	1	6.7	1	6.7
Total	12	80.10 ^a	3	20.0

Note. ^aThe percentage column totals 100.1% because of rounding.

The extent of contribution of the contents of the courses: A wide variety of courses were identified as to the extent of contribution to the current occupation of the respondents. All of the courses taken by the graduates were mentioned as helpful by most individuals. The five highest rated courses, ranking from high to low, were Administration and Supervision in AEE, Evaluation of AEE programs, Program Planning and Development in AEE, Secondary School Shop Management, and Applying Research Methods to AEE.

The adequacy of the program of study: The highest rated components were, association with faculty, and, advisement on dissertation. The rating of the adequacy of each item is shown in Table 3.

Table 3
The Adequacy of Each Item to the Doctoral Program Rated by the Respondents

Item	1	2	3	4	5	X	SD
	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>		
Advisement on dissertation	-	-	-	1	13	4.8	15.6
Association with faculty	-	-	-	2	13	4.9	16.8
Course work	-	-	-	8	7	4.5	11.8
Qualifying examination	-	-	2	6	7	4.3	10.5
Final oral examination	-	-	-	4	11	4.7	14.5
Library, computer	1	-	2	7	5	4.0	9.3
Professional involvement	-	-	3	5	7	4.3	10.1
Instruction in classes	-	-	2	5	8	4.4	11.2
Other (Core courses)	-	-	1	-	-	0.2	0.0
Other (practice at MCES)	-	-	-	-	1	0.2	0.0

Note. X - rating scale: 1 = very inadequate; 2 = inadequate; 3 = uncertain; 4 = adequate; 5 = very adequate.

The strengths of the doctoral program: In open-ended responses, respondents mentioned five factors as the strengths of the doctoral program. These factors are given in Table 4. The factor mentioned most often (46.7%) was the association with faculty. In addition, 26.7% of the respondents cited the dissertation research experiences as a major strength. Two (13.3%) of the respondents specifically cited, professional involvement and two (13.3%) also cited, related to professional responsibilities as strengths of the doctoral program.

Table 4
Strengths of the Doctoral Program Identified by the Respondents

Strength	<u>N</u>	%
Association with faculty	7	46.7
Dissertation research	4	26.7
Professional involvement	2	13.3
Related to professional responsibilities	2	13.3
Research assistantship	1	6.7

Note. Some respondents identified more than one strength.

Comments and suggestions by the respondents : Two of the respondents provided recommendations.

1. "Extension has many excellent programs which are showing excellent results in our limited attempts at evaluation. AEE doctoral students should conduct more research on the results of extension education programs in different subject matter areas. AEE research could be very valuable to university administrators if it indicated positive results of the service arm of the land-grant institution. AEE students have access to many opportunities for researchable problems through the programs of the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service."
2. "For non U.S. students, let them practice at MCES (Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service) and study hard in MSU library. In addition, encourage them to form an international forum to discuss and learn from each other the knowledge and experiences of group members. It'll help them a lot. At present, I remain a national consultant on sociology and rural development at Royal Forest Department (supported by FAO/UNDP/SIDA) for 3 1/2 months. The knowledge and experiences I obtained from MSU help me in many ways."

Conclusions

A majority of the respondents were in teaching positions and/or administrative positions in the field of agricultural and extension education. All were satisfied with their doctoral programs.

The respondents rated all courses they had taken as contributing to their current occupations, rating most of the program components as very adequate and adequate. The respondents rated, association with faculty and dissertation research experiences, as the major strengths of the doctoral program.

Recommendations

Program improvement should focus on emphasizing the teaching and administrative functions in agricultural and extension education. The program of study for each student in the Department of AEE, MSU, should be based on their current or projected occupations and their special interests.

If core courses were established in the Department of AEE, MSU, required courses should be, Administration and Supervision in AEE, Evaluation of AEE Programs, Program Planning and Development in AEE, Secondary School Shop Management, and Applying Research Methods to AEE.

Faculty members should continue to foster their relationships with the graduate students and should seek to promote more dissertation type research experiences.

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