Department of Agricultural Economics, Texas A&M University

STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2027

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The strategic plan for the Department of Agricultural Economics presents our vision, mission, strategic goals, and actionable plans for 2022-2027. We use the SOAR model -- Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results -- through two phases. Phase 1 relates to Research, while Phase 2 emphasizes Teaching and Extension.

Figure 1. The SOAR model for the Department of Agricultural Economics Strategic Plan

Phase 1 Research

Phase 1 identifies the department's strategic future research direction and faculty needs. While Phase 1 focuses primarily on research, it is closely tied to our teaching program needs and direction. Clearly, there is a strong relationship between teaching, extension, and research. Phase 1 was mindful of these dependencies, and it was used to develop the strategic direction of new faculty hires that aligns with the strategic plan. During Phase 1, a total of 40+ faculty came together during a summit to craft strategies and tactics (including a faculty hiring plan) that will help us achieve the department's research aspirations.

Phase 2 Teaching and Extension

Phase 2 expands the steering committee and broadens engagement. This phase incorporated the research strategy from Phase 1 and fully considered the teaching and extension missions of our department. During this phase, we hosted a department-wide summit on January 22, 2022. The summit brought together faculty, staff, students, extension partners, administrators, employers, and the broader community to engage in identifying what is the very best of our department, dreaming about our future, and developing tangible ideas for how to move us forward.

Strategic Plan Steering Committee

Phase 1

- Senarath Dharmasena
- Ariun Ishdorj
- Mary Lea McAnally (Process Consultant)
- Marco A. Palma (Chair)
- Luis A. Ribera
- Richard T. Woodward
- Ximing Wu

Expanded Committee Members

- Amelia Ahles
- Donna Chester
- Tiffany Dowell Lashmet
- Dusty Menzies

Department Administrators

- Rodolfo M. Nayga, Jr.
- Mark L. Waller

THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Vision

The Department of Agricultural Economics strives to be a leading source of education, research, extension, and leadership for agricultural and applied economics.

Mission

As a land-grant institution, we serve a broad constituency including students, producers, consumers, agribusiness managers, policy makers, and other stakeholders. We aim to provide relevant, objective, and timely applied economics programs that benefit these constituents in their decisions and actions.

A RESEARCH VISION AND PLAN FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Overall Research Statement

We are a collaborative faculty with a wide scope of interests, bringing innovation and creativity to solving complex problems at the intersection of agriculture, economics, and agribusiness.

Aspirations

1. Be a collaborative faculty with a wide scope of interests, bringing innovation and creativity to solving complex problems.
2. Bringing affordable and healthy food to improve diet quality and nutrition of Americans through innovative agriculture.
3. Be the gateway for science-based policy solutions to connect and prosper the Americas and the world.
4. Be the world leader in research at the intersection of agriculture and the environment, promoting long-term sustainability of social, ecological, and food systems.
5. Expanding our behavioral economics portfolio to improve decision-making, health, and well-being.

Goal #1 Champion fundamental and applied research that addresses agricultural economics and agribusiness.

Strategies

1. Strengthen our faculty base.
2. Provide reliable support for research endeavors.
3. Support development opportunities for faculty at all levels.

Actionable Plan

1. We have a reputation for broad-based research that serves our constituency base. It is crucial that we maintain this reputation even as we grow and expand and focus on specific research areas.

2. We will adopt a hiring strategy that seeks to attract and land top "athletes" in any area of research.

3. By hiring well-trained, applied economists we increase the breadth and depth of our faculty, which will help to identify research priorities in the coming years.

4. This hiring strategy will also allow us to address shifting instructional needs.

5. Research support necessitates additional investment to enhance our data and analysis tools, improve data collection, and apply data analysis with state-of-the-art quantitative methods.

6. To support our ongoing success, we must also recruit high quality Ph.D. students and provide multi-year funding using departmental and project-specific sources.

7. Faculty development initiatives will expand our researchers' intellectual and inter-personal capabilities. These will, in turn, augment high-impact publications, external funding, and awards. Such initiatives could also help improve faculty retention. These initiatives might include mentoring junior faculty, delivering faculty grant writing workshops, departmental support for grant applications, and sponsored training programs.

Goal # 2 Be internationally recognized for economic analysis of broad agricultural issues in three focus areas.

The three focus areas are: 1) food and nutrition, 2) environmental sustainability and climate, 3) domestic and international policy.

Strategies

1. Emphasize faculty hires in the three focus areas (specify…).
2. Incentivize faculty to conduct research in the three focus areas.
3. Continually broaden the horizon of our research beyond Texas and U.S. to address international issues.
4. Communicate our research programs and outcomes internally and externally.

Actionable Plan

1. While we are known for our broad-based research, we have opportunities to grow our reputation and become known for specific research areas. Based on our current research strengths, expressed faculty interest, and external factors, we will focus on food & nutrition, environmental sustainability & climate along with domestic and international policies that address these issues.

2. To grow our faculty base with in the three focus areas, we will identify the highest quality applicants with an emphasis in the three focus areas and strive to hire the strongest candidates during each recruiting cycle.

3. A sustained hiring program will require that we develop internal processes to facilitate efficient hiring.

4. We must provide ongoing incentives to faculty who engage in research in the three focus areas, including access to research and grant writing team resources.

5. We will seek to elevate our international standing in the three focus areas. First steps include identifying and coalescing our existing international relationships.

6. To further enhance our international reputation, we will encourage faculty to continually broaden the horizon of their research to consider issues beyond Texas and U.S.

7. Ideas to expand our reach include exploring the creation of institutional opportunities and leveraging the role of the Center for North American Studies and the Center for Conflict and Development.

8. Better communication across all platforms will be critical to garnering attention. To that end, we will augment our communications to include the following: consistent messaging in our in-house communications, producing high-quality policy briefs, and establishing a social media presence including content routinely delivered via Twitter and Facebook.

Goal #3 Encourage and support interdisciplinary and collaborative research.

Strategies

1. Value and champion interdisciplinary and collaborative research at the department level.

2. Identify key TAMU strategic partnerships and work to identify potentially profitable research opportunities.

3. Identify key external strategic partnerships and alliances and increase faculty outreach and interactions.

Actionable Plan

1. As the biggest challenges in agriculture and agribusiness are by definition interdisciplinary, we will pursue a collaborative, big-picture approach with established incentive structures that reward such an approach.

2. We will strive to create a research culture along with tangible opportunities and rewards that encourage and support those who take risks and engage in interdisciplinary and collaborative research projects.

3. We will clearly define the value of interdisciplinary and collaborative research at the department level in terms of tenure and promotion in order to provide clarity to those who choose to engage in such research.

4. We will develop internal processes that allow faculty to specifically call out interdisciplinary / collaborative activities in annual evaluation process.

5. We will formalize with FEC to specifically mention interdisciplinary/collaborative activities in review/promotion.

6. We will identify productive areas of research. A first step is for the department to identify existing research collaborations with other departments, colleges, universities, and centers. For example, we will leverage our relationship with ConDev and the Borlaug Institute. We will also strive to develop long term linkages with Latin American institutions where we have affinity.

7. We will actively collaborate with the new Institute for Advancing Health through Agriculture to increase faculty involvement, grant funding, and multidisciplinary opportunities.

8. We will seek out and encourage collaborative partnerships with industry, government, policy makers, NGOs, and other academic units.

Goal #4 Develop long-term sustainable sources of funding

Strategies

1. Identify external funding sources and work to secure reliable support.

2. Engage in department level development activities to build an endowment.

Actionable Plan

1. To expand our faculty and improve our technology and data infrastructure, we must compete more aggressively for established grants as well as identify new sources of funding.

2. We will provide department resources and actively support faculty in their efforts to secure traditional funding sources (e.g., USDA) and non-traditional funding sources (USAID, Million Challenge Corporation, FAO, etc.).

3. We will proactively monitor important research trends and emerging areas to anticipate funding opportunities that align with the department's priorities.

4. The Aggie Network is by some accounts, the most engaged alumni base in the U.S. We can more actively seek to build and deepen relationships with our former students to broaden our base of financial support.

Goal # 5 Foster a diverse and inclusive research culture where everyone has a sense of belonging

Strategies

1. Augment diversity through hiring and retention efforts.
2. Create a vital and inclusive research environment that encourages active faculty participation.

Actionable Plan

1. In order to reflect the constituencies that we serve as well as the demographics of the State of Texas, we must continue to diversify our faculty.
2. We will work to attract and recruit a diverse pool of faculty candidates via active and broad searches.
3. We will clearly communicate to candidates the Aggie core values because we recognize the impact of expressed institutional values.
4. We will encourage all faculty members to consider "hiring" as a year-round activity and empower faculty to be constantly on the lookout for rising young colleagues, particularly scholars from underrepresented groups.
5. Because people do their best work when they feel welcome and valued, we will encourage a culture of acceptance and respect.
6. To create a vital research environment, we will support department-wide colloquia and other opportunities for scientific collaboration and will support formal and informal faculty interactions including faculty interest groups.
7. We will more clearly set expectations that everyone in the department is included in problem-solving and innovation.
8. Use seminars and the departmental symposium, typically held in April of each year, as a vehicle to share faculty and graduate-student research.

Cross-Cutting Goals for Data Science and Behavioral Economics

During the strategic planning process there were two areas – data science and behavioral economics -- that were identified as cross-cutting strengths that we will seek to expand in the years to come.

Data Science

Expand faculty use of artificial intelligence, big data, and innovative digital tools to meet all our strategic research goals.

Actionable Plan

1. We will elevate the use of artificial intelligence, big data, and innovative digital tools to evaluate and empower agriculture and agribusiness decision making and develop actionable insights.
2. An important initial step is to deepen our faculty's expertise in data science methods in pursuit of our research in all areas. This involves supporting faculty development in all aspects of data science.
3. Incorporate data science into a broader set agricultural economics areas, including food and nutrition, sustainability, environment, sales, entrepreneurship, financial planning, risk management, etc.
4. Seek collaborative research projects with other TAMU departments and institutes that are adding data science to their strategic approach.

Behavioral Economics

Champion behavioral economics as a research methodology to address all our strategic research goals.

Actionable Plan

5. Given our current depth of expertise in behavioral economics, it would be a competitive advantage to deploy more departmental resources to this research method.
6. Prioritize the communication of how our faculty's research can improve health and well-being by using behavioral economics to understand and inform decisions, choices, and actions of producers, consumers, agribusiness managers, and policy makers.

AN EXTENSION VISION AND PLAN FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Overall Extension Statement

Enhance economic well-being through continuing education, applied research, and outreach to meet the needs of our clientele.

Aspirations

1. Bridging the gap between industry and academia.
2. We are the bridge between production agriculture and corporate industry partners. through relationships, education, objectivity, and resources.
3. Extension is the preferred source of education and reliable/unbiased information for farmers, ranchers and ALL Texas.
4. Creating solutions to problems of the future by integrating extension/teaching programs through inter-relationships with industry partners.

Goal #6 Integrate teaching and extension programs to foster student development and create solutions for agribusiness and agriculture issues

Strategies

1. Generate awareness of extension economics and encourage basic skill development.
2. Create field opportunities to expose undergraduate and graduate students to extension.

Actionable Plan

1. Partner with youth groups such as FFA and 4-H to increase general awareness of our programs and opportunities.
2. Create a one-credit class to teach about careers as extension economists.
3. Encourage and incentivize students to compete in the extension competition at AAEA and other professional conferences.
4. Develop extension exchange/mini (2-week) internships where graduate and undergraduate students work in extension.
5. Offer extension internship/ course credit for undergrad or grad student rotating around extension faculty.

6. Develop shadowing program with alumni in field-based activities to help undergraduate students see long-term career potential.

Goal #7 Foster collaboration between extension and research to solve critical issues

Strategies

1. Encourage research and extension faculty to self-identify to collaborate on specific joint projects.
2. Expand extension graduate funding and include research faculty in student committees to broaden the scope of applied research topics.

Actionable Plan

1. Incentivize participation on Texas-focused grant opportunities.
2. Host extension and research presentations on potential joint opportunities including Texas issues and related national issues and include regional emphasis from district faculty.

Goal #8 Explore and develop new extension opportunities and areas

Strategies

1. Identify clientele needs so that our endeavors are more inclusive and efficient.
2. Continue to invest in faculty in general including in Corpus Christi, Lubbock, and San Angelo.
3. Increase external funding through contracts, grants, partnerships, and sponsorships.

Actionable Plan

1. Increase engagement with stakeholders (clientele, industry partners, community partners, government, etc.) to guide program development.
2. Proactively respond to emerging needs and issues in order to develop new programs to meet changing needs of Texans.
3. Increase extension involvement in AFRI and other grant opportunities early in the grant development process.

A TEACHING VISION AND PLAN FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Overall Teaching Statement

Provide students with the tools, expertise, and critical reasoning needed to respond to the world's biggest challenges in agricultural and applied economics.

Aspirations

1. Our programs magnify student strengths by creating flexible opportunities for students to tailor their education.
2. We have pathways and partnerships spanning pre-high school to graduate students and professional champions to create diverse communities.
3. We are a learning center for global agribusiness, food and agriculture and behavioral economics applications.
4. Ensure our Ph.D. graduates are well prepared and capable of getting a tenure track faculty position.

Goal #9 Sustain a balanced approach to the use of in person, technology-enhanced, and online programs for all of our students.

Strategies

1. Maintain a strong in-person foundation for our undergraduate programs.
2. Bolster our online programs to meet ever-changing needs.
3. Optimize our face-to-face, online and hybrid options to best support our master's level graduate programs.
4. Invest in information technology to support our students.

Actionable Plan

1. Improve the placement of students by providing high-impact opportunities inside and beyond the classroom.
2. Increase student access to computers, software, including advanced statistical programs at low cost.
3. Increase industry participation and partnership by inviting guest speakers and former students in the classrooms (virtual and face-to-face).

4. Actively look for technological enhancements for classroom teaching.
5. Adopt open-source software in undergrad teaching.

Goal #10 Continually improve our Undergraduate Curriculum to respond to shifting student and constituent needs

Strategies

1. Engage faculty to refine our undergraduate program content.
2. Increase focus on our honors program.
3. Enrich our undergraduate experience.

Actionable Plan

1. Develop AGEC Tracks that are customizable and include new programs that industry, students, and faculty want and need.
2. Split faculty into sub-committees to request help on determining what classes are required, recommended, or need development.
3. Coordinate all undergraduate course learning outcomes.
4. Increase enrollment in Honors Program to 5% of students by 2030.
5. Create/bring back mini-semester trips for students with faculty leads - some around Texas, Southeast, California, Midwest, etc.
6. Move to smaller class sizes, especially in capstone courses.

Goal #11 Increase faculty interaction with our Undergraduate students

Strategies

1. Encourage and incentivize faculty involvement in for-credit learning experiences.
2. Increase faculty involvement in extracurricular student activities.

Actionable Plan

1. Expand the current FYE program to a second, spring semester for freshmen incorporating AGEC 117. Start a FYE experience for transfers (optional) that works in conjunction with AGEC 117.
2. Create more study abroad opportunities.
3. Involve more faculty in student organizations and engaging with prospective students.

Goal #12 Continually improve the quality of our master's programs to sustain the excellent national and international reputation.

Strategies

1. Actively seek competitive students.
2. Enrich our MAB experience.
3. Offer MS degrees that will encourage enrollment.

Actionable Plan

1. Reduce credit hours to be comparable to other MS programs.
2. Increase faculty involvement in MAB Case Study Competition.
3. Host industry seminars and invite former students to participate.

Goal #13 Refocus the PhD program to best prepare students for academic and research-oriented careers.

Strategies

1. Examine program requirements and course flow to introduce students to academic research earlier in the program.
2. Support Ph.D. student teaching endeavors.
3. Offer professional development opportunities for all PhD students to improve job-market readiness, communication skills, and technical writing.

Actionable Plan

1. Work to standardize the course timeline for each year of the Ph.D. program.
2. Increase flexibility for the current areas of specialization through existing resources.
3. Consider changes to the major field examination process, including the possibility of replacing the preliminary examination with a second-year paper.
4. Create guidelines for Ph.D. student instructors and develop teaching opportunities and loads to help time management with research.
5. Form a job market committee.
6. Develop summer internships for Ph.D. students in industry and government, to learn about future jobs and expand on the network of colleagues.

AN OVERALL VISION FOR THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Overall Environment Statement

Foster an inclusive and stimulating environment to work, learn, collaborate, serve, innovate, and thrive.

Aspirations

1. We have a clear, defined, measurable plan to recruit and support a diverse department.

Goal #14 Champion diversity, equity, and inclusion among our faculty, staff, and students.

Strategies

1. Develop metrics to evaluate diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Recruit and hire faculty and staff that reflect the demographics of the state of Texas.

Actionable Plan

1. Start early (pre-high school): plant seeds of opportunity.
2. Develop outreach programs to attract undergraduate transfer students from minority serving and tribal land-grant colleges and Universities, and leverage the McAllen contacts as a pipeline.
3. Continue involvement in COALS minority programs such as STEMing for Success and STARS.
4. Promote recent graduates from underrepresented populations on social media.
5. Promote professional association programs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Goal #15 Create an environment where all department members can work, learn, collaborate, serve, innovate, and thrive.

Strategies

1. Offer competitive wages to our staff.
2. Deliver professional development activities for staff to improve skills, promote learning, and support long-term career progression.
3. Create opportunities for department members and AGEC students to gather, celebrate and engage in unstructured conversations and activities.
4. Commit to regular internal communications with staff, faculty and students and develop appropriate channels.

Actionable Plan

1. Host meetings and non-technical seminars where faculty relay their ongoing projects to graduate and undergraduate students. Work to attract faculty to these meetings.
2. Create intentional opportunities for undergraduates to talk about struggles and solutions.
3. Host monthly topics-based lunch groups that would cover issues such as writing guidance, teaching approaches, computational tools, latest econometric methods, how to secure grant funding, and how to be successful on the job market.
4. Expand out-of-office opportunities for interaction.
5. Resurrect the Commons Committee with GSA involvement.
6. Add a "faculty spotlight" to the weekly newsletter.