

IFAS Matters

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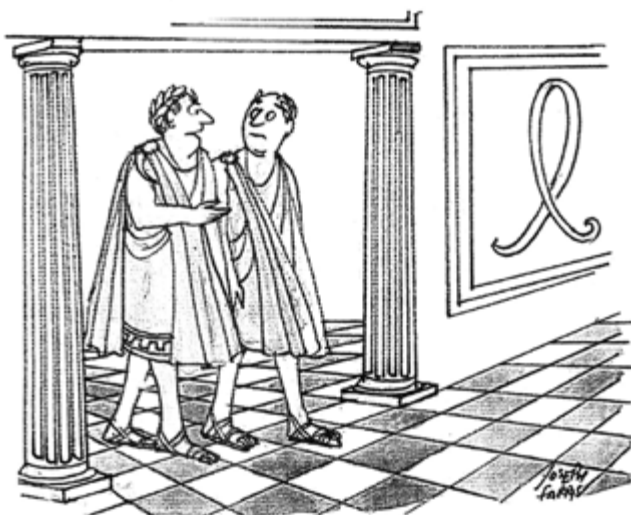
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IFAS Matters - July 2014

Posted on July 23, 2014 by Jack Payne

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"What Caesar doesn't understand is that all politics is local!"

Land-Grant Universities Are a Good Model for Facilitating Food Security

Just to keep up with rising demand, global food production must increase by 70 percent by 2050, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. Furthermore, the higher temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, increased incidence of severe weather episodes and sea level rise that climate change is predicted to deliver can all threaten crops. In fact, if climate change isn't mitigated, it will reduce food production by 2 percent per decade. That's the wrong direction to meet the growing demands of an already too-hungry world.

While governments debate the efficacy of each other's climate change models, it's the world's poorest and most food-insecure

Multimedia

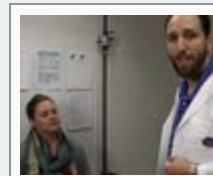
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countries that are most affected. However, no country's food system will be unaffected by worsening climate change.

To propose that land-grant universities could be a panacea for the ongoing global food security inertia would be quixotic. However, to propose that the land-grant model might be a highly accessible prototype for an action plan that would glean quantifiable outcomes and bring science and technology to the masses is not only doable but time-tested and proven.

The land-grant model is the quintessence of the "think-global-act-local" ethos. Or, as a former Speaker of the U.S. House, Tip O'Neill said, "All politics is local," which encapsulates the principle that politicians' success is directly tied to their ability to understand and influence the issues of their constituents. In other words, politicians must appeal to the simple, mundane and everyday concerns of those who elect them.

In plain terms, in the land-grant model, **global learning** is put into practice against a **local backdrop**. Land-grant educators, researchers, and outreach agents-- extension specialists democratize knowledge and technical expertise by utilizing a citizen-based capacity for self-knowledge. By taking relevant research to the local people through extension, land-grants engage in problem-solving for the public good that creates opportunities to deepen community engagement. As an added benefit, land-grants' public work philosophy and tripartite mission of education, research and outreach make them highly effective mechanisms for influencing decision-makers.

Twenty-first century land-grant institutions are not localized islands of excellence in a globalized world. They are instead integral, problem-solving networks. The land-grant network's strategic plan explicitly calls for ensuring food security, expanding agricultural trade, and meeting human needs in a sustainable way. The ideals of engagement and reciprocity set them apart.

Extension is the boots-on-the-ground land-grant intelligence service, providing applicable and timely research information, education and technologies to the public. Extension agents are an ideal network of information providers because they're local. Furthermore, land-grants' extension arms make them local almost everywhere in the nation. Knowledge produced at the local level is often considered more salient and trustworthy than that produced and delivered by distant institutions. This positions land-grants as trustworthy sources of information for lawmakers. And it makes it more difficult for climate-change skeptics to dismiss the land-grants' science as biased.

The land-grant model's approach to learning is collaborative and cooperative. It encourages democratic and participative methodologies to learning and teaching that support global citizenship. The emphasis is on making connections to real-life contexts and recognizing peoples' needs now and in the future. Partnerships are an essential component of the land-grant model

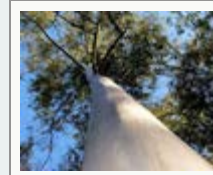
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and relevant learning opportunities. The research, teaching and extension are enhanced by contributions from environmental, governmental and international agencies, non-profit organizations and businesses. These partnerships provide opportunities for community engagement and wider achievement.

The land-grant model stands at the forefront of global food security planning and is well suited to addressing the grand challenge of feeding the world. Inherent in its mission of public good and solving citizen- and/or community-specific problems is a proven methodology for educating, researching, and disseminating sustainable and scalable solutions to food security. The model works because it doesn't get bogged down with abstractions and one-size-fits-all solutions. At the same time, land-grants develop awareness and understanding of engagement in democratic processes and being able to participate in critical thinking and decision-making at the local, national and international level, fostering interdependence among people, the environment, and the impacts of actions, both local and global.

Clearly no one model will save us from widespread famine. But we would have a lot better chance of meeting the 2050 challenge with a thousand working global land-grants instead a of a few, groupthink political polemics du jour.

-Jack



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