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The University-Industry Connection

Last month I discussed some of the public's perception about agricultural research and why a cloud of distrust overshadows an otherwise remarkable record of achievement. I want to continue that discussion and address the closely related issue of the industry-university connection, and criticism of that relationship that has arisen in some quarters.

It is ironic that there should be such criticism at a time when the federal government is trying to encourage closer cooperation between universities and industry to stimulate productivity. In a recent issue of *Science* (25 January 1980), officials of the Administration's Office of Science and Technology Policy enumerated potential benefits for our national interests that could accrue from stronger university-industry linkages.

It is tempting to defend the traditional relationship between agricultural research and industry by citing past successes. I don't believe that approach would restore public confidence, however, because our detractors would continue to single out a few failures. Therefore, I want to discuss this issue from the perspective of future relationships.

It must be recognized, first of all, that our present society is overwhelmingly urban with no immediate or recent ties with people who produce our food and fiber. There is little firsthand experience with the cooperative relationship which has existed between agricultural research and the private sector. The major concerns of people today are retail costs of farm products, their ready availability, and their wholesomeness. They are also becoming increasingly concerned with the quality of our environment, and with the health and attractiveness of rural communities where more and more people live and work.

Our research goals are designed to deal with the same concerns. However, for the process of research and innovation to be completely successful, it is necessary to translate new knowledge into new products and services. There has to be a linkage between the research-innovators normally found in universities and governmental laboratories and those in the private sector who take these ideas and develop them into products or services for the consumer. Without this linkage, it is unlikely that the products of agricultural research would find their way to the marketplace in the manner and at a cost expected by the public.

This cooperative relationship is crucial and needs public understanding and acceptance if we are to continue a successful program of publicly supported agricultural research.

How do we gain and preserve this understanding and support? For starters, we need to make clear who controls what we do, what influences our decisions to pursue various lines of research, and how we decide to do what we do.

A university's most priceless asset is its integrity. Our value to society and our public support depend directly on the degree of our independence and openness and the soundness of the information we produce. Nothing must be allowed to tarnish the fundamental principles of a university's search for and extension of knowledge.

I am not suggesting that these fundamental tenets have fallen into disuse or have been replaced by more pecuniary principles. I do believe, however, that the long period of agriculture's successful partnership with industry has led to complacency.

We need to be diligent in publishing and discussing the results of our research in publicly accessible media, regardless of their consequences for special-interest groups of any kind. We must publicize adverse consequences of new compounds, new technologies, and new practices just as freely as we publicize their benefits. We need to demonstrate our integrity by fully disclosing any private- or special-interest affiliations of our faculty and staff that would appear to compromise their objectivity. We must be sure that our decision to pursue knowledge is based on a need for that knowledge, not on a need for the money to support our existence. We must continue to produce results of the utmost quality. And, finally, we need to define our objectives in terms that describe a broad public interest.

A word of caution: independence is not to be mistaken for arrogance or isolationism. It is not to be pursued at the expense of keen awareness of and attention to the critical problems facing rural communities and the consumer.

I have no doubt that the university-industry connection for the agricultural sciences will flourish once again with public support and understanding if we reaffirm and diligently practice the pursuit of truth in an environment of independence. Our friends in industry and in agriculture alike will want no less from us.