

# The Professional Agricultural Economics Labor Market: Discussion

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This discussion reviews the job market facilities—national registry, *AAEA Newsletter* employment listings, and annual meeting employment service—provided by or in cooperation with the American Agricultural Economics Association. By being misinformed or unaware of some key aspects and procedures of these facilities, particularly of the national employment registry, some employers and AAEA members are either overlooking these services or not getting optimal results from their use. My comments and suggestions stem from observations as chairman of the AAEA's Professional Registries and Employment Committee.

The Registry for Agricultural Economists is a year-round employment service operated by the Illinois State Employment Service with the cooperation of AAEA. It was started in 1974 as an experimental computer-based employment service for professional workers, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. ISES continued the service after the last extension of the grant expired in 1981. Only three such professional registries exist in the United States; the others, also operated by ISES, cover economists and pharmacists.

The National Registry features a computer-based file of job applicants—agricultural economists interested in new positions or consulting assignments. Applicants fill out a registration form developed primarily by AAEA committees. Registry staff enter this information into a database residing in a computer operated by the New York State Department of Labor. The information for each applicant can be retrieved via terminal, formatted, and printed as a resumé that can be supplied to prospective employers.

To obtain the resúmes of registrants that meet the requirements of a specific job opening, an employer fills out a job order form that

parallels the contents of the applicant's form. Using an efficient search program (STAIRS), registry staff then perform an on-line search of the registrant file to find applicants that meet requirements of the position. Any absolute requirements plus the primary requirements of the position are first employed in the search. If this initial search yields more resúmes than most employers would welcome receiving—more than 100 or so—then other qualifications or characteristics specified or implied on the job order are used to zero in on those applicants most likely to be of interest to the employer. (Thus it is essential that registrants have responded, and responded appropriately, to those questions that are used in searches—more on this later.) The employer receives a computer-printed resumé for each applicant identified by the final search. About 50 resúmes are considered a desirable result. Some job orders, however, specify requirements that few applicants meet; for instance, consulting firms bidding on a foreign contract may require knowledge of a specific language or country. Thus in the year ended 30 June 1982, an average of 21 resúmes were printed per job order received. In all, 3,363 resúmes were printed in response to 157 job orders.

Note that in the year-round service described above, applicants are not able to obtain information on job orders or openings. This restriction enables the registry to obtain from employers reliable information on placements that resulted from use of the service. The registry needs such data to demonstrate its effectiveness and thereby justify its funding by the ISES and the federal government.

Many employers, however, also want to have knowledge of their openings more widely circulated among agricultural economists on a timely basis throughout the year. This opportunity is afforded by the employment ads carried in the bimonthly *AAEA Newsletter*. The newsletter employment listings thus supple-

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ment, rather than duplicate, the functions of the registry. In this respect, the notice in each newsletter stating: "Unless the employer requests otherwise, the listing will be forwarded to the Registry . . ." is somewhat misleading and has no practical effect. As already noted, the registry does not provide job listings, but rather conducts searches of its applicant file in response to a specific job order that specifies search criteria and is signed by the employer. A more useful newsletter notice would be "Employers are also urged to send a job order to the Registry for Agricultural Economists, 40 West Adams Street, Chicago, Illinois 60603, which will furnish, without charge, resumés of registrants meeting requirements specified for the position."

Once each year, at the AAEA summer meeting, job applicants do get the opportunity to examine all of the active job orders. Also, if they wish, employers may peruse the resumés of all applicants. Thus, at the annual meeting, the traditional exchange of job listings and resumés has been melded with the automated facilities of the registry. Before the meeting, employers and applicants are asked to update their job orders and resumés. After registry files are revised, employers are provided with resumés from fresh searches, and job orders and resumés are printed for display at the meeting. In spite of the obvious importance of updating one's resumé and the advantage secured by doing so before the cutoff date on which fresh searches are made for employers, some applicants neglect this chore and deadline. Not surprisingly, at the meeting these applicants are often dismayed by the state of their resumés or by their lack of response from employers.

During the year ended 30 June 1982, which includes employment service activity at the AAEA meeting at Clemson University, 359 new applicants were added to the registry and 157 job orders were received. These data indicate that job market activity has declined significantly since the late 1970s. During 1978-80, job orders averaged 352 and reported placements averaged 176. Placements dropped to 74 in 1981 and, still further, to 55 this year. Because these data include employment activities at the annual meeting, they are indicative of lower numbers of job openings rather than of reduced relative use of the registry.

Just before this year's meeting at Utah State University, the registry contained 2,098 applicants (most of them currently employed as

agricultural economists), and there were 103 active job orders—a much lower number than in previous years. But in spite of the apparently tight job market and the record total attendance (members and families) at this year's meeting, the number of applicants using the employment service during the meeting has also been unusually low. It appears likely that whereas the location of the meeting proved to be a superb attraction for established agricultural economists combining vacation with business, the relatively high cost of travel to Utah from the principal graduate and employment centers has discouraged attendance by new and recent job-market entrants that normally account for much employment service activity.

Because of the apparent leveling off of the number of jobs for agricultural economists at land grant universities and in the federal government, there is considerable interest in finding new job opportunities for agricultural economists, particularly in business. Ideas are needed on how business and other nontraditional employers can be introduced to the registry and other AAEA employment services without, for example, exposing our relatively small registry to the hazard of being swamped by desperate registrants from general economics and allied professions. At the same time, agricultural economists seeking these nontraditional jobs should register with the separately maintained registry for economists (where their relatively small numbers should cause little concern) and should also utilize the many other employment aids and services available in the business world.

In my judgment, the three types of employment services now provided by AAEA are capable of meeting most information needs of members and employers. In combination, the three current services are certainly far superior to the sole annual meeting service provided only a few years ago. However, members and employers definitely can exploit the current services more effectively. When one examines the registry, for instance, one finds differences in relative use by different groups as well as strategic errors in completing registration forms that render many registrations ineffective.

Candidates for the Ph.D. degree are presumably the most active and needy job-seeking group among AAEA members. As of 5 May, there were 219 candidates in the registry. Students at some schools had registered in

numbers that appear reasonably large relative to the probable total number of candidates at these schools: California at Davis, 12; Cornell, 14; Florida, 10; Iowa State, 18; Michigan State, 23; Minnesota, 13; and Ohio State, 14. In contrast, registration by candidates at some other universities seems inexplicably low: California at Berkeley, 2; Illinois, 5; Nebraska, 3; North Carolina State, 3; Oklahoma State, 3; and Purdue, 6. Although AAEA membership is not required by the registry, it will be interesting to examine, in further analyses, whether the incidence of AAEA membership among graduate students exhibits a similar pattern. There should be little sympathy for agricultural economists or graduate students who are uninformed because they are not AAEA members.

Some advice on registering can be addressed to serious job seekers. As you complete the form, keep in mind that the ultimate purpose of registration is to have your resumé selected during on-line job searches requested by employers. It is important, therefore, to fill out your registration form completely and with particular attention to the nuances indicated below. Failure to respond to some seemingly minor questions may keep your resumé from being selected during most or even all searches. Be sure, for example, to respond to the question about your availability for positions of various duration: failure to indicate availability for short-term or long-term positions is likely to keep your resumé from being selected during searches for consulting assignments and permanent openings, respectively. If you do not indicate your U.S. citizenship, you will not be selected for federal government jobs. Similarly, if you do not indicate a minimum acceptable salary or your total years of professional experience, you may not be selected when employers have specified values for these items. But, be realistic on these items, or your response may fall outside the range indicated by major employers with openings at your level of education and experience. In particular, if you are an older-than-usual Ph.D. candidate, avoid the temptation to include time spent in farming or agribusiness in your total professional experience. Too high a value for this item—particularly ten years or more—may keep your resumé from ever being selected during job searches for entry-level positions. Give par-

ticular attention to your selection of professional specialties, as these figure prominently in most searches. (A much improved specialty code list was introduced with the new registration form issued in 1981, and many searches involving the more traditional areas of agricultural economics are now more successful in pinpointing individuals with desired specialization. Employers who have not used the registry recently because they were disappointed with the results of searches before 1981 should give it another try.) Finally, register early in your job hunt, as your resumé cannot be selected in searches made before your registration was received.

Before concluding, it is appropriate that I comment on the registry data used by Strauss in the analysis presented at this session. Early in 1981, when new registration forms were adopted, all previous entries were deleted. A large number of the new registrations were received during the second quarter of 1981, and thus the bulk of the salary and other data studied by Strauss are as of that date. However, several hundred additional registrations received between that period and 5 May 1982 were also included in his database.

In 1981, AAEA plans called for all members to register, as the AAEA membership directory was to be produced from the automated registry data. It turned out, however, that only slightly more than half of the membership heeded their association's call to register. Thus, plans for producing the directory had to be changed. But because of the initial scheme, the registry file studied by Strauss contains data on many agricultural economists in addition to those actively seeking employment, including larger numbers of older and well-established members than otherwise would have registered. The statistical reliability of studies such as that by Strauss was thus enhanced.

Before I forwarded the registry data to Strauss, educational institutions and position titles listed by registrants were coded, thereby expediting their use in analyses. Other basic coding and editing were also performed, and some important registrant errors and discrepancies were corrected. While time did not permit sophisticated and detailed editing, basic coding and editing were diligently performed and the database used by Strauss thus reflected a very satisfactory degree of accuracy.