

Operational and Leadership Adjustments to Sustain a Dairy Program at a Major Land-Grant Institution Neal Merchen

Issue: In the face of declines in state funding to most public institutions, maintenance of the facility and labor infrastructure to support agricultural production research and instruction is one of the most intractable problems for land-grant programs. At many institutions, this problem is most acute and difficult to address for support of dairy production facilities. The dairy program at the University of Illinois requires major adjustments in operation and management including prospects for radical downsizing or elimination. The critical status of the program has been precipitated by a number of factors including: 1) Loss of financial support from the state; 2) Recurring deficits in the revolving operating account; 3) Aging, obsolete facilities; 4) Insufficient labor resources; and 5) Limited assumption of “ownership” and responsibility by faculty working in the facility. This project was undertaken as a FSLI project primarily because of point #5 – could we successfully recapture a sense of ownership by faculty?

What Has Been Done: An *ad hoc* group was appointed in May 2010 to evaluate the existing situation and identify programmatic and operational issues that should be addressed to meet the challenges. That committee issued a report in July 2010. Briefly, the report: 1) Identified needs for capacity of the facility to meet ongoing and projected research and teaching; 2) Proposed a plan for staffing (including increased use of student employees) to match labor needs with labor resources; and 3) Proposed investments that would improve efficiencies of use of available labor and financial resources.

The Department utilized discretionary resources of about \$55K to make some initial modifications to facilities. A change in paradigm was implemented that relied less on full-time permanent staff and more effective use of student labor. A strong effort has been made to re-establish a culture of engagement of faculty users to help problem-solve and develop a sustainable model of operation for the facility. Metrics have been identified to monitor step-wise success in achieving goals and we have attempted to improve faculty engagement by ongoing review of progress by our *ad hoc* group and by the departmental administration.

Impacts/New Partnerships: The dairy industry in Illinois is modest in size and economic impact and its potential for growth is unrealized for a variety of reasons. We have attempted to build stronger relationships with the leading dairy commodity group in the state; tangible outcomes to those attempts are lacking. While the industry is rather vocal about the need and expectations for support for their programs from the university, they have been limited in their ability to assist us in building resources to facilitate meeting those needs.

Outcome of Project: The project is a work in progress. Our commitment is to keep the program in operation for at least three years unless progress is so insufficient to warrant “pulling the plug”. Progress is critically monitored on at least a quarterly basis. After one year, the following positive indicators are noted: 1) Some reduction in herd size without concomitant net reductions in production has occurred (i.e., greater efficiency); 2) Labor force seems to be sufficient and efficient; 3) Financial management is improved.

Commitments to hire two additional staff under a special recruiting program have been made – **unfortunately, responsiveness of faculty and management to this opportunity has been lacking.** There is no sign of improvement in faculty engagement. Faculty who conduct work in the unit have not met expectations for increased involvement in management oversight or decision-making

Value of FSLI Experience in Project Success: The most valuable asset gained from FSLI that has facilitated this project has been an improved understanding of the need for change to become an ingrained element of a successful organizational culture. This was not new knowledge to me – previous experience has dictated the importance of embracing change in long-term success of our department. In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin argued that “*It is not the strongest of the species that survive; nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.*” The greatest leadership challenge in making this project successful is re-building a greater sense of “ownership” and engagement in operations of the unit by faculty users. While I assess that this has not been achieved as fully as I would like, I believe that progress has been made and will continue to emphasize those expectations.

Contact Information:

Neal R. Merchen, Professor and Head, Department of Animal Sciences, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801 (217) 333-3462, nmerchen@illinois.edu