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How do we grow new farmers?

Learning from another American pastime

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Often in my travels as a consultant and speaker, I am asked, “How do we grow new farmers?”

Every time I hear this question, I draw a quick breath. This is truly a remarkable question to hear in America, which prides itself on “feeding the

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world.” If the most productive agricultural engine on the planet does not know how to grow new farmers, who does?

To answer this question, one needs to go back 50 years. A 1962 report by the Committee for Economic Development, a Wall Street think tank, concluded that the problem with U.S. agriculture was that it employed too many people. These human resources could be better allocated, the CED argued, by moving people off the farm, to be replaced by larger equipment.

“[Our] adaptive approach utilizes positive government action to facilitate and promote the movement of labor and capital where they will be the most productive and earn the most income,” the study said (CED, 1962; see also Ritchie, 1980). The mechanism for this forced migration of labor was simple: a conscious effort to keep commodity prices low (Meter, 1990). Another mechanism was providing public tax incentives for adopting new technology that replaced labor.

Indeed, from 1962 to 2011, farmers more than doubled productivity (USDA ERS, 2012a). Food consumption rose from USD107 billion (USD790 billion in 2011 dollars) to USD1.2 trillion (USDA ERS, 2012c). Yet net farm income fell. In 1962, all U.S. farmers combined earned USD46 billion (in 2011 dollars) of net cash income (total cash receipts from marketing farm products, less the production expenses required to produce them) (USDA ERS 2012b). By 2011, net cash farm income had fallen 9%, to USD42 billion (USDA ERS 2012b). Farmers had collected USD793 billion in government payments during that time, but they had paid USD1.2 trillion in interest on loans — which means that at least USD363 billion left the farm sector over that 50-year period¹ (Bureau of Economic Analysis, n.d.; USDA ERS, 2012b; see also Meter, 2011, p, 205). This is a classic case of public intervention magnifying market failure.

This occurred despite billions of dollars of subsidies provided by millions of immigrants who worked below minimum wage under conditions of grave physical risk, drawing upon skills they learned in impoverished settings, working more diligently and more effectively than many American-born children ever learn to work.

So, one answer to the question, “Why doesn’t America know how to grow new farmers?” is that our public policy has been to remove the farm labor force under the guise of economic efficiency. As the CED had hoped, both labor and capital were extracted from the U.S. farm economy (CED, 1974). Scant attention was paid to the question of how we would generate new generations of farm owners. Funding for agriculture training programs was dismantled, even as farm income declined; essential training grounds for farm production and family values (such as 4-H, FFA, and high school agricultural courses) eroded in importance.

¹ This data is adjusted for inflation by taking nominal dollar charts and adjusting to 2011 dollars using the U.S. Federal Reserve Board Consumer Price Index.

America received the very policy outcomes it asked for. This was no “market-based solution.” This was federal intervention designed to make some players in the market stronger than others.

If we can accomplish that policy goal, why couldn’t the U.S. accomplish the goals of promoting healthy locally based food systems, and continuously training new generations of farmers?

As I consider a practical approach to growing new farmers, I often think of that essential American pastime, baseball. Almost every town in the U.S., large or small, has several baseball fields. Many sponsor highly competitive teams. Provision of these fields does not seem to accomplish much in building an economic advantage for the U.S., and it could even be argued that baseball games — especially afternoon contests in the big cities — actually take people away from contributing to the economy. Baseball is inherently seasonal. Yet we seem to know how to grow new baseball players. Despite *Moneyball*, we do this to promote vague and unmeasurable values, things like “teamwork,” or “athletic talent,” which many now believe should be squeezed out of the broader economy in favor of hard-nosed dollar counts.

Nearly every township board or city hall allocates money for baseball fields close to where young people grow up, so everyone will have a chance to learn the game. A few years ago, we even made it easier for girls to have the same access to baseball fields that boys have. People of all races join the game. Playing baseball has been viewed by some new immigrants as a way of showing one’s interest in joining mainstream America.

It is hard to imagine how anyone actually learns baseball, however, since few learn the game through coursework. People are actually expected to learn by doing it, often by giving each other tips or watching a slightly better player’s chops. Parents have been known to teach skills to their children. Even to this audacious display of self-organizing, however, there is a public policy response. A remarkable number of cities, towns, and park systems pay adult players a modest amount of

money to coach youngsters or to umpire Little League games. It is almost as if we were all assured access to a precious right.

Truly, we rely on the American competitive spirit to motivate youngsters to learn how to play well, and to credential themselves by winning baseball games. As these youngsters mature, they may try out to be placed on a team where they can play on smoother fields, with larger outfields and higher fences, and where more and more people can watch them play. I am told that parents can become quite impassioned by watching their children vie for places in these arenas, and that games can be chaotic at times. These Little League, Babe Ruth league, and local amateur playing fields are typically built using public funds. That is to say, public money is spent in ways that give Americans pleasure, as well as ways of building their own capacities in a self-organized way. Private investment by families dovetails with public investment by local municipalities.

A few of the most highly motivated players go on to play in college, semipro, or minor league ball, where the competition is fiercer and the potential reward is greater. At this level, people are financially rewarded for their personal skills — yet many of these full-blooded Americans are more than happy to play these contests on a baseball field that was — gasp! — subsidized by public dollars.

A few of the lucky move on to multimillion-dollar contracts, where they can vie for attention on the cable networks, trying to steal viewers away from Iron Chef competitions. I don't condone these superstar salaries, since to my thinking farmers create more value, but they seem popular. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that millions of

Americans pursue the baseball dream with absolutely no financial compensation.

Shockingly, nearly every major metropolitan area in the U.S. sports a professional stadium (or two) designed expressly for the game of baseball. The Minnesota Twins' beautiful new stadium, paid in large part by Hennepin County over the opposition of its residents, features a climate-controlled outdoor space where grass can be kept alive year-round, and a specially designed sandy soil so rain drains promptly. Yet many northern cities tell me their growing season is too short to allow for food to be grown inside city limits; the season is "too short," I am told.

Most startling to me is the term of art we use in America to describe this ubiquitous, seamless, multifaceted, inclusive, and values-based system of seasonal enterprises that ensures we have plenty of competitive baseball players who understand teamwork.

work — this elegant and complex combination of public and private investment, working in complementary ways for a socially approved good.

We call it a "farm system."

It is almost as if we had learned from our 4-H clubs, our FFA chapters, and our multigenerational family farms how to build a system of baseball facilities and processes that ensure open access to all. Indeed, the patient, long-term planning that a farmer needs to raise a healthy dairy herd, or to effectively rotate pastures with crops to reduce weed pressure, or to pass a farm down to the children, would be essential in framing a long-term approach to the baseball question.

Perhaps we could now apply these same principles to the topic of growing new farmers. Yet to do so,

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we might have to decide, as a society, that feeding all of our children fresh food is as important as making sure they all have access to baseball. 

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