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Reflections on the Professional Contributions of
James D. Shaffer in National Programs of
Food System Organization and Performance

I am honored to comment briefly about the impressive and highly significant contributions of our illustrious colleague Jim Shaffer concerning national programs of food system organization and performance. His work in this general area received particular attention at a time during the late 1960s and 1970s when structural changes were sweeping through the food and fiber industries and widespread questions were being raised about who would control agriculture. Many farmers were losing their managerial independence, and concerns were expressed about how well consumers were being served. Researchers were grappling with issues of organization and performance of the overall U.S. food and fiber sector.

It was in this environment that Jim Shaffer played a pioneering and influential role, both intellectually and operationally. His commissioned working paper, undertaken for the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, focused on publicly supported economic research in agricultural marketing.¹ Jim introduced the term subsector to denote “a meaningful grouping of firms related vertically and horizontally by market relationships.” Within subsectors, he emphasized the influence of institutions and rules on market outcomes and the need for research on institutions and rules, including possible modifications, that might be appropriate. He stressed that some research would need to be organized on a large scale, involving coordination of various individual efforts. Several procedural issues, along with research questions, were identified and elaborated in the paper.

This landmark paper was followed by another paper for a conference on better economic research for the U.S. food and fiber industry. It formed the basis for extensive discussions on research applications by other researchers.² Here Jim addressed special issues related to scientific industrialization of the U.S. food and fiber sector and consequent implications for research. Another conference, again with the lead paper by Shaffer, was oriented toward public policy issues arising from rapid and profound scientific industrialization of the U.S. food and fiber sector.³

Subsequently, Jim was invited to develop a lead article along these lines for publication in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*.⁴ The article generated a series of review papers⁵ and a variety of related comments and discussions. Jim's focus here was on the need for institutional innovation to deal with issues emerging within the transformed food and fiber sector and his challenge for applied social scientists to be proactive in addressing them. The fourteen published review papers examined numerous aspects that Jim had highlighted. He later became actively involved in another research conference with presentations and discussions relating to public regulation. At this conference Jim followed up on some of his previous writings, and his was the lead conference paper published with others in a special issue of the *AJAE*.⁶

In stressing the need for analysis of institutions and rules, Jim moved beyond conventional research thinking and approaches toward relevant problems arising from scientific industrialization and organizational change. He inquired about the possible effects of institutional obsolescence and out of date rules on resource allocation and the distribution of income. That need continues, and many would see it even more urgent today as we consider the effects of mergers, the roles of influential pressure groups and technical advances in communications.

I now turn briefly to Jim's very substantial role and talent in developing and implementing a large scale research project, NC-117, which became a major national effort involving most land grant universities, the USDA and other federal agencies. The project came into being as Jim's persuasive call for a large scale coordinated research effort was consistent with similar emerging motivations by several colleagues. Eventually, in 1970, a small group met with Jim and developed a proposal which, after going through numerous iterations, was approved three years later as regional research project NC-117.⁷ During the following decade of project activity Jim was a leading participant, along with many participating scholars, to produce a flood of relevant publications and the training of dozens of graduate students. Ideas and concepts he had developed in his previous writings had a large influence on colleagues and graduate students through his wisdom, creativity and gracious interpersonal skills. He employed his marvelous professional endowment of gifts and graces most effectively and successfully on the project and in other endeavors as he grew from a popular and insightful young professor to a rare treasure of our profession.

References

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