Pursuing a Unifying Message

Elevating Food, Agricultural and Natural Resources Research as a National Priority

A University Perspective

Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
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A University Perspective

Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation

and

Iowa State University

in a partnership with

Mississippi State University, Soil and Water Conservation Society, Texas Tech University and Colorado State University
Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation

The Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation is committed to promoting a broader and more complete understanding of agriculture and to building upon Charles Valentine Riley’s legacy as a “whole picture” person with a vision for enhancing agriculture through scientific knowledge.

Editors

Brian Meyer, Iowa State University, and
Richard L. Ridgway, Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation

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Highlights

Highlights are listed below from an April 6, 2015, discussion among an invited group of university leaders, representatives of the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and the Non-land-grant Agriculture and Renewable Resources Universities and other participants.

- **Federal Investments.** There was a shared recognition that an alarming lack of federal investment in food, agricultural and natural resources research exists in the United States.

- **Societal Needs.** A key element of a unifying message must be how food, agricultural and natural resources research addresses societal needs for the common good. Because it encompasses essential societal needs, it could be defined as “the people’s research.”

- **Multiple Federal Agencies.** A unifying message should emphasize expanding the total funding portfolio across multiple federal agencies, including U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Geological Survey and others.

- **A Solution Supply Chain.** Research investment fuels the solution supply chain needed to address issues that people are passionate about. A deficit of agricultural research leads to a deficit of innovation. In turn, a deficit of innovation leads to a deficit of solutions.

- **Jobs.** Adequate research investment should also be framed in terms of employment opportunities, job creation and risks to jobs associated with emerging threats to food and agriculture.

- **Educated Workforce.** Federally funded research helps universities mentor and prepare the next generation of scientists and specialists in food, agriculture and natural resources. Industry, as well as public institutions, depend on this educated workforce to fill innovation jobs.

- **Target Policymakers.** Although communicating with the broad American public is important, the unifying message should initially be targeted towards policymakers.

- **Collective Efforts.** As efforts continue on pursuing a unifying message, these words from Benjamin Franklin are particularly pertinent: “We must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”
Introduction

The Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation (RMF) released the report Pursuing a Unifying Message: Elevating Food, Agricultural and Natural Resources Research as a National Priority at the National Press Club on December 6, 2014. The report documented that the United States is in danger of losing its position of international prominence in the scientific research upon which food, agriculture and natural resources systems depend. The report called for public and private organizations to work together on a common message and toward a common goal at a time when global challenges require additional investment in agricultural research. After detailed presentations on the importance of total food, agriculture and natural resources system and the deficit in related research, there was broad interest among the 65 persons present on the importance of a unifying message in support of food, agricultural and natural resources research. Therefore, RMF began to take steps to get additional input from different stakeholder groups.

On April 6, 2015, RMF invited a group of 23 leaders of universities, university associations and others to discuss the university perspective on pursuing a unifying message. The American Association for the Advancement of Science hosted the meeting at its headquarters in Washington, DC. The event was organized and this report prepared with the assistance of a task force composed of representatives from RMF, Iowa State University, Mississippi State University, Soil and Water Conservation Society, Texas Tech University, Colorado State University, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation.

An overview was provided of the federal budget R&D budget with examples for agricultural R&D subject areas that involve three USDA agencies and three agencies outside USDA (Appendix A). A previous review of federal agricultural R&D efforts involved three USDA agencies, three other federal agencies and numerous universities. In the Pursuing a Unifying Message report, 10 federal agencies that collaborate with USDA agencies was summarized. All these reflect the importance of a unifying message involving multiple federal agencies.

Representatives of three university associations provided information and background on their mission and connections with agricultural research and research funding. The associations were the Association of American Universities, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and Non-land-grant Agriculture and Renewable Resources Universities (Appendix B).

The following pages provide a summary of key points and comments heard in the day’s discussion, followed by a listing of participants, observers and support staff. Seven persons associated with the discussions reviewed an early draft of this summary; their input was greatly appreciated.

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Where does common ground exist among universities and university associations for a unifying message?

Recognition of anemic federal agricultural research funding. A sobering thought shared in the discussion was that individual universities or university systems represented around the table work with greater budgets than the $2.9 billion in total U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) research funding. Some nonprofit entities such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation appear to be funding applied and basic science in food and agriculture at more aggressive levels than the nation’s investment.

Increase investment across federal agencies. Investments in agricultural research must be escalated tremendously at the USDA agencies. But funds that address major food, agricultural and natural resources challenges — especially in fundamental sciences — come from a broad base of federal agencies. Some investments may cut across agency boundaries. The President’s Council of Advisors for Science and Technology (PCAST) report indicated a need for a more coordinated, whole-government approach to agricultural sciences. In this vein, one recent discussion is the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) proposed initiative titled Innovations at the Nexus of Food, Energy and Water Systems, which calls for interagency working groups to coordinate interdisciplinary research.

Inclusive portfolio of funding. A successful unifying message effort should be inclusive of funding opportunities and emphasize expansion of the total portfolio. It needs to be a broad stakeholder effort that focuses on growing funding across the board, not competing within “the pie” for different slices or allocations. Individual universities, associations and stakeholder groups may think differently about specific funding programs, and will continue to advocate for what is important to them. But a narrow focus on how large each slice of the total will be — or which slice must shrink for another to expand — reflects the status quo, not progress toward a coalition that voices a higher national priority for all areas of food, agricultural and natural resources research.

Infrastructure. A common thread is concerted efforts of universities and university organizations to address ways to maintain or increase capacity and fund infrastructure. The result builds capital in education, research and extension and outreach, as well as strengthening institutions’ ability to compete for grant and contract funding.

“It is great that China and India have been substantially increasing their investment in agricultural research. That is going to have great payouts for them and great payouts for people around the world. From the U.S. perspective, we need to be asking ourselves: What role and outcomes do we want from our continued investment in agricultural science?”

“We want all funding sources to move forward. We all have our biases about how we would change individual pieces of funding. But it has to be capacity funding. It has to be competitive funding. It has to be infrastructure funding. It has to be extension. It has to be the land-grants and the non-land-grants. It has to be the NGOs. It has to be everybody commonly moving forward and not bickering on how we change percentages."

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3 Report to the President on Agriculture Preparedness and the Agricultural Research Enterprise. 2012. President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. 55 pp. https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/pcast_agriculture_20121207.pdf
Impacts on faculty hires. The need for making agricultural research investment a higher priority can be viewed through the lens of decisions on filling university faculty positions. University leaders are taking a hard look at available external funding opportunities for new hires. They find themselves having to decide between hiring someone focused on pursuing USDA funding or someone who can compete more broadly for research funding opportunities in NSF, National Institutes of Health (NIH), Department of Energy (DOE), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) or other federal agencies. Also, hiring faculty members in areas where research funding is inadequate may undercut their ability to succeed. University leaders may prefer to hire someone who could advance food and agriculture, but the reality is they know where the dollars are and what is expected of them to ensure external funding helps sustain the university’s infrastructure.

Future workforce. The role that federally funded research at universities plays in preparing the next generation of scientists needs to be better articulated. Research funding allows universities to mentor and train the next generation of scientists, extension specialists, industry leaders and economic analysts working in food, agriculture and natural resources. Overcoming the innovation deficit will require filling future jobs, in both public and private sectors, with highly qualified people. Many industry leaders are extremely concerned about having an educated workforce to fill “innovation jobs,” requiring education at all levels, undergraduate to graduate.

From a university perspective, what are likely elements to consider in a unifying message?

“The people’s research.” Think broadly of food, agriculture and natural resources research as doing the people’s work in a similar way to how the USDA has been known as “the People’s Department” for 150 years. Define “the people’s research” as caring about the hungry, poor and those of limited resources; as encompassing both rural and urban; and as well as helping innovators and entrepreneurs who boost the nation’s economy and health and well-being. There is a richness in the idea of a unifying message somehow wrapping around that notion.

Link outcomes of research investment to food security. One dimension of a unifying message is to link outcomes of research investment to food security. Each year economic estimates are made on gaps in agricultural production by country and region of the world. Economists are beginning to link together the story of agricultural productivity and food security with the impact of a country or region’s investment in research and development and in education.

Sustainability. Universities must give their attention to the issues of sustainability in a way that was not part of the agricultural research revolution of the 1950s and 1960s.

Stress both economic benefit and public good. The impact of investing in basic and applied agricultural sciences has a huge impact on the nation’s economy. Industries depend on early-phase, hypothesis-driven research in academia. Basic science per se may not profitable for industry, but often it is the foundation for new products, services and discoveries. Without a strong federal investment in fundamental research at universities, the downstream impact on industry can be huge. But the benefit should not be framed solely on economic terms. It’s also the public good that comes environmental goods and services and a plentiful, affordable food supply. Recent examples that put the food supply at risk are the California drought and citrus greening disease in Florida. A unifying message must consider what consumers care about and identify the public good.

“If we continue down this road [in faculty hiring], there is an awful lot of food, agriculture and natural resources priorities that won’t be served in the future. As a country, we have to decide if we want our science and teaching infrastructure moving in that direction.”

“We must be able to sustain our advances not just for one season or the next season, but for all seasons that are yet before humanity.”
Articulate the solution supply chain. Research investment fuels the solution supply chain that offers solutions to the public and for the public good. The solution supply chain is more than just a return on gross domestic product; it is a return on investment across multiple disciplines of food, agriculture and natural resources to provide solutions that can be integrated into the economy, communities and society. The outcome of renewed research needs to be placed in the context of what it means for the person on the street. So a unifying message should articulate how research impacts the solution supply chain for issues people get passionate about, including good jobs, food safety, personal health and quality ecosystem services provided by the environment. Also, policymakers must be made aware of the deepening innovation deficit that will impact future generations and put the nation in a diminished position.

Target the unifying message to policymakers. Trying to change the minds of the broad American public as a whole is a huge challenge. Recent efforts to increase the NSF budget have focused on policymakers and worked to present the economic and competitiveness arguments. Policymakers may be more receptive to the argument that national investments are stagnant compared to other countries like China and India. Also, experience has shown that some policymakers “get it,” but many do not. Although a target audience is policymakers, the message must be in the context of constituents and citizens — to make the linkage between the needs of citizens and the need for research resulting in innovation on real problems.

Stress workforce issues. The employment opportunities linked to food, agriculture and natural resources can get the attention of policymakers, who often are focused on job creation. Not only creating jobs, but investment in research can address problems that threaten jobs in these sectors. For example, the lack of research capacity to adequately address a fruit or vegetable disease may result in significant losses of local industry employment and an increase in imports of those crops. This spring, the new five-year jobs outlook released by the USDA and Purdue University indicated an estimated 57,900 high-skilled job openings annually in the food, agriculture, renewable natural resources and environment fields, but only an average of 35,400 new graduates with a bachelor’s degree or higher to fill those openings — an annual shortage of 22,500.

Bring in state leaders. State governors are aware of many of these issues, and especially the local economic impacts tied directly to agriculture. They can be another cohort of champions for the unifying message. Also, as another example, the RMF Unifying Message Task Force — composed of representatives from RMF, Iowa State University, Mississippi State University, Texas Tech University, Colorado State University and the Soil and Water Conservation Society — has been looking into working with the states’ Farm Bureau organizations on making agricultural research funding a higher policy priority on the nation level.

Co-investment from industry. More can be done to encourage public-private partnerships and private-sector investment, even in basic, hypothesis-driven research. The new Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research established by the new Farm Bill will be an innovative public-private partnership to fund research. The foundation has $200 million that must be matched from entities outside the federal government, and has been working to identify the programmatic approaches it will take.

Make agriculture as personal as health. Universities can help make the case that the public should understand and be as engaged in agricultural research programs as it is in human health-related research and technologies. The public is always interested in “the next greatest thing” in health research, what may improve their personal or family health or what may potentially solve or cure ailments that cause pain and suffering. The same kind of engagement does not exist for agricultural research; for example, much of the public does not think deeply or personally about its food supply. While health-related personal or family emergencies or disasters hit home, most in the nation are not experiencing, or have not experienced, a food-related emergency. When a
state’s drought or an emerging crop or livestock disease affects food supplies, most people simply adjust without a second thought.

**A parallel with public health?** The importance of investment in basic agricultural research infrastructure might be found in support for state and county public health services and systems. Just as that system fosters maintenance and assurance of healthy populations, the other may ensure maintenance and assurance of the “health” of the economy, the food supply and natural resources. Investment in basic infrastructure helps make possible the innovation needed to be at the forefront of biosciences; for example, to produce food for a rapidly increasing world population at a time of increasingly unpredictable climate. However, it also must be understood that that message — research addresses challenges of global population — may not hit as close to home with many in the public as a message that hits the individual and families.

**Articulate the agriculture answer.** Because agriculture’s footprint is so broad, the challenge that many struggle with is an effective definition for food, agricultural and natural resources research. By comparison, “NIH-funded research” or “NSF-funded research” may quickly connote health or discovery sciences. A common way of capturing agricultural research that touches all elements of society is needed so citizens can quickly understand. Be prepared to articulate an answer to the general public’s question: “What is agriculture?”

**From a university perspective, what should “the way forward” consider?**

**Consider societal needs.** A unifying message must coalesce around the humanitarian, the economic, a secure and affordable food supply, personal health, and employment and workforce issues — all to the common good. There is a humanitarian need for increased agricultural productivity and a clear competitive need. Cast the message in the context of the citizens and it impacts them. It’s about societal needs.

**Harness the power of consensus.** An exercise must be undertaken in which diverse interests come together and agree on common priorities. These will become the common themes that drive coordinated outreach to elected officials. It doesn’t mean that each cannot pursue support for projects that are important to them, but it means there are common themes that everyone can agree to. With Research! America, it was not so much about doubling the funding for NIH, but the ability to create a coalition with a common voice that every group spoke from.

**Cultivate a national spokesperson or champion.** An iconic figure visible in the public eye can help put a face on a unifying message. For example, Bill Gates is someone who understands the issues and backs it up with significant resources.

**Use the political landscape to our advantage.** It was noted that agricultural issues in Congress sometimes play out in a unique political landscape. There is the potential that farm, agricultural and food issues reflect a certain dynamic in policy arenas that goes beyond partisanship. The Farm Bill, for example, sometimes sees coalitions coming together that may not form along party lines. Coalescing a message that illustrates the impact on nearly every part of the economy and society, and articulating it through a diverse set of coalition forces is a roadmap to success with policymakers.

**Next steps.** The RMF, jointly with its partners, plans to obtain additional inputs from key stakeholder groups through additional focus groups or other means. Those groups could include scientific societies and those with focused interests in food and nutrition, agricultural production, rural communities, natural resources, forestry, sustainability, bioeconomy and climate.
Participants

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Trevor White, Combest, Sell and Associates and Southwest Council of Agribusiness
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APPENDIX A

Federal R&D Budgets

AGENCY R&D BUDGETS FOR FY 2015 (budget authority in millions of dollars)

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* Total NIFA: $1,289
** Transfer from CCC and not FY specific

EXAMPLES OF MULTIAGENCY PROGRAM R&D BUDGETS FOR FY 2015 (budget authority in millions of dollars)

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Acronyms

AFRI  Agriculture and Food Research Initiative
ARS  Agricultural Research Service
CCC  Commodity Credit Corporation
DOD  Department of Defense
DOE  Department of Energy
EPA  Environmental Protection Agency
ERS  Economic Research Service
FFAR  Foundation for Food and Agricultural Research
FDA  Food and Drug Administration
FS  Forest Service
NASA  National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NIST  National Institute of Standards and Technology
NIFA  National Institute for Food and Agriculture
NIH  National Institutes of Health
NOAA  National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NSF  National Science Foundation
USGS  U.S. Geological Survey
Association of American Universities

The Association of American Universities (AAU) is a nonprofit organization of 62 leading research universities in the United States and Canada, including land-grant, other public, and private universities. Membership is based on universities meeting defined criteria. AAU focuses on issues important to research-intensive universities, such as funding for research, research policy issues and graduate and undergraduate education.

Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is a research, policy and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. APLU has a membership of 238 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems and affiliated organizations. In policy and advocacy in agriculture and natural resources, APLU’s Board on Agriculture Assembly (BAA) advocates on behalf of agricultural research, extension and education funding. BAA’s Policy Board of Directors oversees the activities of the Committee on Legislation and Policy and the Budget and Advocacy Committee. The Council for Agricultural Research, Extension and Teaching, a grassroots group of citizens from every state and territory, works with the Budget and Advocacy Committee to enhance national support and understanding of the land-grant university system’s research, extension and teaching programs to achieve a better standard of living for all people.

Non-land-grant Agriculture and Natural Resources Universities

The Non-land-grant Agriculture and Natural Resources Universities (NARRU) is composed of 60 universities, six of which are members of the APLU. NARRU universities currently have about a third of nation’s undergraduate enrollment in agriculture and natural resource programs, many of which are increasing their research. NARRU has a nine-member board of directors and functions through committees on legislation, membership, awards and special projects, and communications and marketing. NARRU works closely with APLU and has liaison representatives with most of the units within the BAA.