Land grant universities changed educational process in America

Along with many others, I enjoyed watching Ohio State defeat Michigan and eventually win the Big Ten Championship. As I watched the championship game, it occurred to me that Ohio State University and the Hancock County Extension Office would not exist if an event had not occurred 156 years ago.

The event was the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land grant universities across the country. It is named for Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill, who introduced the bill in the U.S. House of Representatives. This bill established or designated an existing public university in each state, to be funded by an endowment from the sales of federal land, that would teach agricultural and mechanical engineering arts and military tactics (Reserve Officer Training Corps).

The amount of land allocated for sale to a state depended upon the number of congressmen in the U.S. Congress. Ohio was a large recipient since it had 23 congressmen at the time.

State universities that were funded or started by the sale of this federal land were collectively called “land grant universities.” This was a major change in the educational process for the country, which at the time relied heavily upon private colleges, which stressed liberal arts training.

It also opened the doors to higher education for the mainstream population and not only for the social elite.

Ohio’s land grant university started in 1870 after the state used the funds to purchase the Neil Farm just north of Columbus. The rural setting was selected to discourage students from becoming distracted by the city night life, and the central location would allow easier access for all Ohio residents.

The institution was first called Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College. Its first students enrolled in 1873 and it had its first graduate in 1878.

Since the school was more than agriculture, the name was changed to Ohio State University in 1878.

In 1914, Ohio State University and the other land grant universities established the Cooperative Extension Service for their respective state with the passage of the federal Smith-Lever Act. Two factors drove the creation of the Extension Service:

- Policymakers believed that the scientific research being completed by the land grant universities was not being shared with the general public, but "locked up in the ivory towers" of the institutions.
- Belief that the general population would benefit more if an individual was positioned in the community who was involved with the process, understood the applications of the university research, and knew the local needs of that community.

Extension offices were established in each county of Ohio, including Hancock, for these individuals positioned in the community. Most of these offices included individuals in agriculture, family consumer sciences, and youth development (4-H).

Federal, state and county governments fund the Extension Service, thus the original name of the Cooperative Extension Service.

The Smith-Lever Act provided federal funds to the state, which the state had to match. Counties received these matching funds when they provided their financial part.

County funding for Extension can be seen in the non-mandated portion of each county’s annual budget. If a county does not provide these funds, they lose the federal and state match, which is considerably more than the county’s portion, and they lose the information communication link with the land grant university.

Besides losing their connection with their state’s land grant university, they lose the connection with land grant universities in the other 49 states.

In the Big Ten Conference, 10 of the 14 schools are land grant universities. Only Indiana, Iowa, Michigan and Northwestern are not land grant universities.

Today, land grant universities have three major themes: education, research, and service to the community. They produce most of the graduate degrees in the country, provide much of the academic research, and provide the most diverse areas of undergraduate programs.

None of this would have happened if it were not for the Morrill Act of 1862. Many land grant universities have at least one building named for Congressman Justin Morrill. On the Ohio State University campus, Morrill Tower, a residence hall, is named for him.

When the Morrill Act was passed in the 1860s, the majority of Americans worked on the farm. Today, less than 1 percent of the population actually works as a farmer to raise our food.

Extension still serves agriculture, but its programming has evolved as the population has become more urban and less rural.

Even though Justin Morrill gets the credit for introducing the land grant university bill in the House, Ohio has a connection—Sen. Benjamin Wade of Ohio introduced the bill in the U.S. Senate.

The next time you are watching the Buckeyes play in a sporting event, remember there is a reason it is called Ohio State University—it is our land grant university created for the general public of Ohio.

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