INTRODUCTION

Although the Midwest poultry industry has grown rapidly over the past decades, poultry departments at Midwest colleges and universities have not shared the same experience. In fact, as you are well aware, poultry as a separate entity at our Midwest institutions has become a thing of the past—the poultry departments are now gone. In most cases, the poultry faculty have been absorbed by the body of animal science. And to make matters worse, with the passage of time, a significant number of poultry faculty have retired and have not been replaced in kind. I know I need not go on because many of you who are here have first-hand experience in this regard and don’t need this reiterated. Instead, I would suggest to you that, from the perspective of the commercial poultry industry in the Midwest, this process of decline is for the most part not well understood. And, to be completely candid, I don’t think there are very many from industry who, until recently, have given the problem much, if any, thought.

As it happens, however, there was a small group of industry people who, through a committee process at Midwest-United Egg Producers a few years ago, started an effort to do something about the diminishing relationship between the industry and the centers of poultry knowledge at Midwest institutions. The direct result of their efforts was the establishment in 1993 of the Midwest Poultry Consortium with membership and funding for the organization derived from the broiler, egg, turkey, and allied industries, as well as several members and supporters from poultry academia.

MISSION AND OBJECTIVES

The Consortium mission as it was determined at that time is to provide leadership, along with support and resources, for facilitation of educational programs for poultry science and poultry research in the 13 Midwestern states. Specific objectives in support of the mission are: 1) to support, maintain and enhance poultry science programs at Midwest universities, technical colleges, and vocational schools; 2) to encourage students to enter the field of poultry science; 3) to increase basic and applied research in poultry science and food science; and 4) to facilitate communication, coordination, and interaction between industry, universities, government, and the interested public.

It is apparent to me, after my relatively brief involvement with the Consortium beginning in late 1995, that the objectives this organization has set for itself are very aggressive and will not be easily achieved. It is also apparent that, depending on one’s personal perspective, the prioritizing of the objectives as to importance will vary.

DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

Before getting into a definition of the challenge facing us, it might be appropriate for me to digress for a moment to give you a little insight into my role in the operation of the Consortium. The Consortium’s accomplishments to-date are in a large way the result of the time and investment made by individuals who have voluntarily given their time to develop Consortium direction and programs. My assignment as the managing director of the organization has been to become the arms and legs of the organization, to explore and learn about the you and your institutions of education, and lastly to acquire the expertise needed to help the governing body of the Consortium in making decisions as to direction and specific program in pursuit of our objectives. And, as you can well imagine, with a staff of one, there is little bureaucracy to deal with but also not many places to hide.

One of the first and, I would add, enjoyable things that I was able to do when I came on board was to meet and get to know some new people from your world of poultry academia. In many cases, it was possible to do this by visiting your schools and meeting with you and usually a few individuals from your respective administrations. The time spent in this regard was highly valuable to me as a way of coming up to speed on current conditions around the region. At the time of these visits it had been about 30 yr since I had
graduated from the University of Michigan, and even with the seasoning acquired as a parent of four college kids, I was somewhat ill-at-ease on my first campus visits. However, I generally got good treatment and a lot of good input.

As the visits progressed, a pattern to the messages given me at each school emerged. In particular, there were three parts of that message that were expressed everywhere: 1) poultry had been absorbed by animal science, and the poultry faculty was in steady decline along with funding and other resources; 2) There were few, if any, undergraduate poultry science courses being taught even though there might still be a full curriculum offering; 3) It was difficult to find and attract students for poultry science classes.

Well, it didn't take long for these three points to become firmly fixed in my mind and to take a prominent position in deliberations with my executive committee over setting a best and most practical direction for the Consortium support efforts and programs.

It is also important to note that there were many positive experiences during my campus trekking. I met some very good, interesting, and dedicated faculty. I saw, in some places, some good facilities; but I saw hardly any poultry students. It was not difficult to see that a lot of you were frustrated and disappointed with the prospects for the future of poultry science at your institution. I even think some of you were embarrassed by the lack of activity in the area of undergraduate poultry science education.

In summary, the incongruity of the importance placed on poultry at the university and by the dynamic growing commercial Midwest poultry industry was difficult to fathom. I also need to add that I was personally concerned by the knowledge that the commercial side of poultry had a very limited understanding of the seriousness of the situation at your institutions.

It was after these university visits that the leadership of the Consortium determined that our first priority would be to attack the problem of declining enrollment in poultry science. We weren't interested so much in what had gone wrong as we were in getting started on a reversal.

**CENTER OF EXCELLENCE**

From its beginnings, the Consortium had the benefit of good relations with the academic community, which had come together in the form of a Coordinating Council and liaison group. It was from these origins that the idea for a regional center of excellence for poultry developed in late 1994. The plan put forth by the council was not much more than an outline for regional sharing of resources and students in a setting for teaching undergraduate level poultry science, but it received immediate support from the Consortium Board. In fact, in short order funding of more than $100,000 was pledged by the Consortium to get the program going. It was our thinking that our role was to provide support and resources, and the academic community could decide how to best get the job done. It was an exercise in free enterprise, as we had expressed no preference as to location for the instruction nor did we feel the need to get involved with those who would participate in developing the specific program.

The plan as it unfolded was to offer three courses in poultry science in each of two summers at one or two university locations. The University of Wisconsin poultry faculty got off to a quick start by getting their administration's support for a summer session open to students from around the Midwest. Wisconsin's Agriculture Dean, Roger Wyse, in a very important step, committed to work toward solutions to reciprocity questions and for the elimination of the need for a tuition surcharge for out-of-state students. With our optimism running high in early 1995, we thought we might be able to hold the first classes that summer. However, there were simply too many pieces to bring together, so our kickoff was delayed until this year. In fact, we are right now in the 5th wk of our 6-wk session at Madison.

By deferring our startup to this year, we were able to focus on some of the critical requirements for a successful first year. The Council curriculum committee determined the course offering for the first 2 yr. Incubation and Hatchery Management, Avian Physiology, and Poultry Business Management in Year 1, and Avian Health, Advanced Poultry Nutrition, and Poultry Product Technology in Year 2. Each of these classes were designed as three-credit-hour courses.

The opportunity to be involved in the decision making process was available to interested faculty across the 13-state area with institutions from more than half of those states being actively involved. In an undertaking of this nature, there are numerous aspects, such as calendar, course design responsibility, and prerequisites, that need coordination. And, in some cases, we simply had to make compromises knowing that we would gain greatly from the first year's experience and improvements would follow. It is my observation that the Consortium played a critical role in this university-industry partnership through its commitment to the plan and by keeping the pressure on to make certain that the Center of Excellence would become a reality.

**THE CONSORTIUM'S ROLE**

An important motivating factor for companies to participate in the Consortium is the desire to see the development of a pool of human resources and talent that would be available for employment by the industry. Administrators and faculty raised the question often—are there good job opportunities in the Midwest poultry industry? Well, we had done a survey of industry needs, and we knew that the industry was growing. But, the facts were that we did our recruiting for employees on a company-by-company basis. Thus, it seemed to us that there was an opportunity for the Consortium to take up the role of promoting the industry employment opportu-
nities through college career day events. And, obviously, we could also promote the Center of Excellence at the same time. It was in this way that we decided that we would take on the responsibility for recruiting students for the program.

Prior to going on the road to sell our program to students, we decided that it would be best if we could put together a package of benefits for the prospective Center of Excellence applicant to consider. The three components that we felt would be the most important to students were: 1) a unique learning opportunity that for a majority of the students would be on a different campus and with a variety of faculty from universities across the Midwest; 2) internship experience in conjunction with study; and 3) scholarship support.

Our target audience was primarily underclassmen—freshmen and sophomores—who were interested in agriculture, food science, or the biological sciences. I personally attended career day events sponsored by the agriculture schools in 11 states. The quality of these events varied by location, but the most successful in my opinion were those that made it clear to both students and participating companies that the school was keenly interested in this being a successful experience for student and company alike. Several, but not all, schools did this very well. From our perspective, it was time very well spent and will be repeated again this fall. As I met and spoke with students about the Center of Excellence program, it was relatively easy to pick out those students who were attracted by the combination opportunity of study at a different campus, with new people and faculty, and combined with an intern opportunity. I stressed that this was a competitive program with limited enrollment. These campus visits produces a list of about 75 students with expressed interest in the program. Final enrollment came to 22 students from 10 schools in 9 states.

While on campus, I was able to tell students about the Undergraduate Assistantship program that had been developed from a suggestion made by a University of Illinois professor. In 1995–96, the Consortium made gifts to seven schools of $1,500 each. The funds were to be used by the faculty person making the application to hire an underclass student to work as part of an ongoing project involving poultry. The objective was to introduce students with an interest in science to the area of poultry research at a time early in their college education. The program as presented to the student put the responsibility for him or her to seek out the work opportunity at their school and encourage the faculty member to make application for the funding. Six of the seven recipients were freshmen and four from this group are either part of this year’s Center of Excellence class or are doing an internship with one of our member companies. This program will be continued in the coming school year.

The final piece of our package was to commit to each student accepted to the Center of Excellence program a relationship with a “sponsoring company.” The sponsor’s role is to provide an internship opportunity along with a mentoring and networking relationship for the student during the participation period. Sponsors have agreed to assist the students with travel funds when needed between class and work, and to compensate them in an amount great enough to cover their costs of living in a short-term work setting. These sponsor relationships were designed as much as possible around the career interests of the students. The sponsoring companies have willingly assumed this responsibility for an internship that may only last 4 or 5 wk—a point that speaks to the seriousness of their commitment to the success of the Consortium programs and their desire to find top-quality people.

**PARTNERING AND CHANGE**

In a relatively short period of time, the Consortium has become actively involved with developing partnering efforts with educators, students, and institutions. Without question, our effort is young and our programs will need to be changed and upgraded if we are to remain competitive in the race to attract top human resource talent to our industry. We must succeed in achieving results in order to retain our base membership support and funding.

We also recognize that we need to have strong partners in the education business. We feel we can work along with you, but we know we cannot and do not want to replace or circumvent you and your institutions. We also know that we are not the answer people, and we need to remain a minor partner in the relationship with academia. But, at the same time, it is our view that there is a need for great change within the Midwest region when poultry science education is looked at in the total. Those ugly words from business and industry—downsizing and consolidation—are clearly coming into play at your institutions today.

It is also not likely that our organization is going to offer direct solutions for the dwindling presence of poultry science faculty and curriculum on your campuses. Rather, the real challenge is yours to determine how you can organize yourselves into vehicles of change that will produce for you new partnerships within the agriculture school, and maybe the biological sciences or business school, and certainly with the food science group. Partnerships that will allow poultry scientists, teachers, and researchers an opportunity to be an active part of the growth sector known as the food business.

As an industry and as individual businesses, the Midwest poultry sector has a lot to feel proud about. There have been many accomplishments over the years, and a bright future lie ahead. I think it is possible that we may be seeing a new day in which through partnerships between industry and academia, we will learn new ways to best work together in our common cause of poultry science and education.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

As a final word I need to say that I deliberately left from my remarks the mention of numerous people who have been very helpful to me and the Consortium over the last 18 mo. However, I cannot leave without giving notice of credit and thanks to Bernie Wentworth—Bernie is a great believer in poultry, and I hope, for my own selfish reasons, a friend of mine for a long time to come.