August 2015

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Helen H. Jensen
Iowa State University, hhjensen@iastate.edu

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Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/iowaagreview/vol7/iss3/6
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Professor Helen Jensen joined the faculty at CARD and the Iowa State University Economics Department in 1985. At that time, the Food and Nutrition Policy section had just been established, with a goal of exploring the link between agricultural and trade policy and consumer demands in the marketplace, both at home and abroad. Helen took the lead in developing this area of inquiry, and she was named head of the division the following year.

Since that time, she has led a number of projects in the division as principal or co-principal investigator. Helen says that the important issues today are much the same as when she started at CARD. “I think, though, that there is increased recognition in the United States that consumer choice and preferences are important to ag markets and producers,” she says.

The Food and Nutrition Policy Division has seen its funding level more than triple over the past few years. “This increase reflects recognition of the quality of the division’s past work,” says CARD Director Bruce Babcock. It also reflects, according to Bruce, the recognition by federal and state government that they need help in designing policies and successfully implementing reform, and that they look to Helen and her division for policy leadership.

Helen’s latest research investigates how new food safety regulations will affect different agricultural sectors. The results of two separate studies suggest that new Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point regulations will likely add relatively small costs for large processors in the pork industry, but they will lead to considerable costs for small Iowa apple cider processors.

Another recent study involved a survey of Iowa households receiving food stamps in order to see how they were faring after dramatic changes in welfare and food assistance regulations. The study found that nearly 30 percent of Iowa’s households that had been on food stamps reported experiencing some degree of hunger in the past year (based on USDA’s food insecurity scale). “This seems like a relatively large percentage for a state like Iowa,” says Helen, “and it is similar to other states that conducted similar studies.”

In the classroom, Helen has taught several undergraduate- and graduate-level courses. Currently she teaches courses on the economics of consumption and food and agricultural marketing.

Helen says she has most enjoyed the cross-disciplinary nature of CARD, as well as the collaboration with graduate students, post-doctorate researchers, and other CARD staff.

The way that CARD challenges its faculty on many levels is a feature that Helen also appreciates. “The demand for output that is of academic value and that has components with teaching or educational products makes the work in a research center like CARD unique,” she says.

Helen grew up in Pennsylvania and attended graduate school at the University of Minnesota (master’s) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (doctorate). At home in Ames with her husband Rudy, who teaches at Grand View College, she gardens and participates in various sports. She says she also likes to spend time in northern Minnesota, canoeing, skiing, and snowshoeing. Helen and her husband have a son and daughter, both recent college graduates.