

The Board on Agriculture Assembly: Structured for Success

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) represents 237 public universities and is comprised of various commissions, boards, and sections. One of the most prominent and legislatively active APLU organizations is the Board on Agriculture Assembly (BAA), which represents the interests of land-grant colleges of agriculture and natural resources and related institutions.

BAA Structure

The BAA was reconstituted in 1999 and is now comprised of five sections: (1) Administrative Heads Section; (2) Experiment Station Section; (3) Cooperative Extension Section; (4) Academic Programs Section; and (5) International Agriculture Section. Management of the BAA falls to its 10-member Policy Board of Directors (PBD). The BAA has two standing committees that report to the PBD:

- **Budget and Advocacy Committee.** The BAC develops the annual federal appropriations priorities for the BAA and oversees the system's advocacy firm (Cornerstone Government Affairs). The chair and advocacy chair of the BAC are drawn from the Administrative Heads Section and the other voting members represent the BAA's sections and other APLU boards (e.g. Human Sciences and Veterinary Medicine) and sections (e.g. Forestry) and other affiliated organizations.
- **Committee on Legislation and Policy.** The CLP develops the BAA's recommendations to Congress for the Farm Bill (which is rewritten about every five years) and other authorizing bills. Like the BAC, the CLP is led by an AHS member and is broadly representative of the BAA and as well as other APLU boards/sections.

In addition to these two permanent committees, the BAA has a corps of about 125 citizen advocates from around the country who are appointed by their respective land-grant deans and directors. This group — the Council for Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching (CARET) — meets once a year in Washington, DC, in a joint session with the Administrative Heads Section. The CARET-AHS delegations are briefed by the BAC leadership and Cornerstone on the system's appropriations priorities for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and then fan out across Capitol Hill to deliver those priority requests to House and Senate offices.

A Record of Quantifiable Success

As we recognize over 150 years of the Morrill Act, it is appropriate to stop and reflect upon three specific case studies that illustrate how the BAA's structure has led to an enviable record of success:

- **CREATE-21.** One reason why food, agriculture, and natural resource funding lagged behind other scientific disciplines was an antiquated organizational structure at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). To modernize, streamline, and elevate the USDA science enterprise, a group of visionaries from the land-grant system developed the CREATE-21 proposal. See: www.create-21.org. This idea became the centerpiece of the Research Title of the 2008 Farm Bill and resulted in the establishment of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. While NIFA is still a young agency, there is mounting evidence that the White House Office of Science and Technology and other elements of the federal science community are taking food, agriculture, and natural resource funding needs more seriously.

- Capacity and Competitive Program Funding.** As shown in Figure 1, funding for the seven NIFA program that are routinely identified as the land-grant system’s “core priorities” have been steadily increasing. Moreover, the growth came in both the main competitive grants program (the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative) and the six programs that support capacity and infrastructure at 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant institutions.

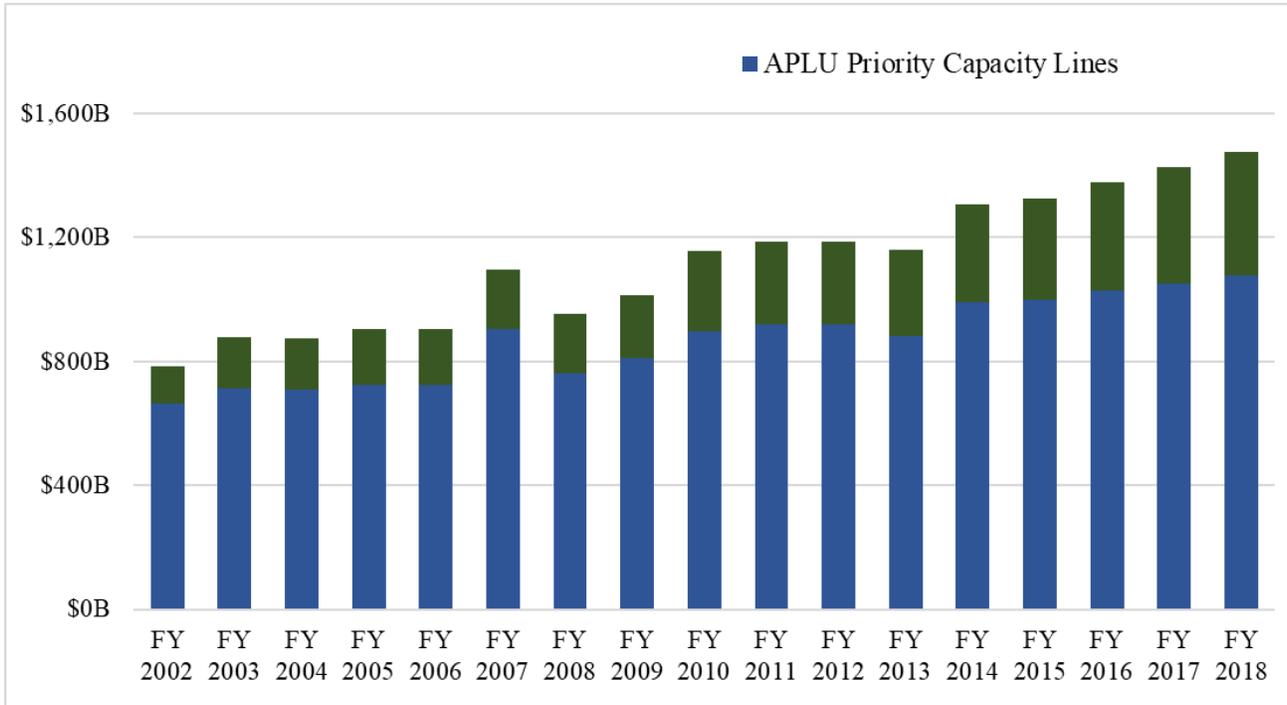


Fig. 1: Growth in Core Priority Systems

- NIFA Topline Funding.** While the PBD and BAC have rightly focused on growing and protecting the NIFA funding lines of greatest benefit to the land-grant system, we have been mindful that all NIFA programs help the system and/or other public universities. As shown in Figure 2, we have succeeded over the last decade in keeping the NIFA budget strong despite major challenges in FY 2007 and the FY 2010 to FY 2012 period.

“Secrets” of Our Success

As detailed above, the BAA has achieved tremendous success since the 1999 reorganization (and especially since Cornerstone was retained in 2002). We believe that this favorable track record can be directly attributed to the following factors:

- Unified Voice.** Prior to 1999, the BAA’s constituent organizations were permitted to pursue their own advocacy strategies, and many hired their own lobbyists. This situation caused widespread frustration within the land-grant system and confusion among our supporters within the Senate and House of Representatives. Now, we speak (as much as possible with a system as diverse as ours) with a single voice, are represented by one lobbying firm, and—most importantly—*sanction all advocacy efforts through the BAC, CLP, and PDB structure.* (CREATE-21 is an example of the benefits that can accrue when we work through established channels and speak with a unified voice.)
- Fair, Transparent, and Predictable Priority-Setting.** The Policy Board of Directors—working with and through a succession of very capable and conscientious BAC and CLP chairs—has established a fair, transparent, and predictable priority-setting process. The CLP, for instance,

begins work approximately two years before Farm Bill authorities are set to expire using a “bottom-up” system that canvasses the CLP’s constituent groups to ascertain their priorities. The BAC uses a similar member-driven process and starts working on its priorities in July, which is approximately seven months before the annual budget-appropriations cycle begins with release of the President’s Budget Request (in February). These lengthy, but regular priority-setting processes provide all elements of the system numerous opportunities to bring their priorities forward and air their concerns. (We would identify the BAC/PLD decision-making process as the primary reason why we’ve been able to increase the system’s core priorities and protect/grow the NIFA topline.)

- **Focused/Consistent Priorities.** Another advantage of a rigorous priority-setting process is the ability to identify the BAA’s top appropriations and authorization priorities. Prior to 1999, the system’s advocates would approach congressional decision-makers with a laundry list of 50 or 60 programs. When asked to identify the top priorities on the list, they were unable to do so, saying, instead that everything was of “equal importance.” Given the absence of system-wide priority setting, it is no wonder that we were not as successful as we could have been. (The sustained growth in the system’s seven core priorities in recent years is evidence that a focused effort increases greatly the likelihood of success.)

Concluding Observations

Every victory in Washington, DC, is hard earned. The Policy Board of Directors of the Board on Agriculture Assembly of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities is justifiably proud of what our efforts have achieved over the last decade and we believe that the BAA is uniquely positioned to continue to do well even under current budgetary constraints. *Of course, future success can never be assured, but we will have a much greater probability if we always speak with one voice, set our priorities in a fair, transparent, and predictable way, and focus on the core priorities that benefit the system as a whole. And, of course, all BAA advocacy efforts must continue to be authorized through and specifically sanctioned by the BAC, CLP, and PDB.*