Elena Irwin is a professor in the Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics. Her research focuses on the economics of land use in urban, urbanizing, and agricultural regions and has been supported by external research funding from NSF, USDA, and others. She is the co-founder and faculty director of the new Sustainability Institute at Ohio State. In this role she provides university leadership for sustainability research and learning programs, including mentoring 28 jointly hired faculty. She is a member of the US EPA’s Board of Scientific Councilors Committee for Sustainable and Healthy Communities and was elected to the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists Board in 2015 and the North American Regional Science Council Board in 2010, serving three-year terms each. She served as an associate editor of the AJAE from 2010-13. In 2012 she co-founded the Environment, Economy, Development and Sustainability major at Ohio State, a cross-unit curriculum that now serves more than 200 undergraduates. Her Ph.D. is in agricultural and resource economics from University of Maryland.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for AAEA?

AAEA has built a strong network of economic researchers, educators, policy makers, and others focused on agricultural, environmental and other applied issues. While the association’s membership has remain steady in recent years, it will have to expand to recruit new members with new interests in order to remain relevant and viable into the future. Doing so requires the association to maintain core focus areas while also being inclusive of a diversity of applied economic research and researchers. Another challenge is the dwindling funding for our research from conventional sources. New venues and opportunities are needed. Funding opportunities are increasingly tied to interdisciplinary research with a broader scope extending beyond economics, but interdisciplinary scholarship is fraught with challenges. These concerns point to multiple opportunities for AAEA. The association can engage a greater diversity of researchers by supporting a full range of economic research and communication on food systems, environmental, development, health, poverty, and sustainability issues in both domestic and international contexts. In addition, given the challenges of interdisciplinary work, there are opportunities for AAEA to provide training and exposure for economists who want to pursue this. Finally, while AAEA has a strong tradition of supporting women and others from underrepresented groups, more is needed to ensure that the association is doing all it can do to promote the balance that is essential for bringing new ideas, experiences, and creativity.

What actions would you initiate to address the challenges and opportunities described in your response to the previous question?

There are a variety of initiatives that could be pursued to cultivate more funding opportunities and engagement, and in so doing raise the profile of AAEA and our members. For example, AAEA could provide more opportunities for its members to interact with program officers and researchers from federal agencies beyond USDA and help connect researchers to alternative sources of funding, including foundations. In order to ensure that there are more opportunities to promote research from a wide diversity of applied economic topics, I would advocate engaging with other economic associations and exploring potential strategies for the association to support more work on a broad array of human-environment-development issues. With respect to multidisciplinary research and leadership, it is encouraging that AAEA is taking steps in this direction with its upcoming summer workshop and I would like to build on this effort. In terms of fostering inclusion, I would work with the Committee of Women in Agricultural Economics (CWAE), Committee on Opportunities and Status of Blacks in Agricultural Economics (COSBAE), and others to find ways that AAEA can expand the support and impact of such initiatives.

At the end of your three-year term, what changes/new initiatives would you have helped create?

I hope that I will have effectively worked with others to create new opportunities for AAEA to support research on a broad array of economics research that is relevant to food, environment, development, health, and other pressing societal issues. In addition, I would like to have contributed to strategies that broaden connections with other economists, researchers, and stakeholders to help AAEA teachers, researchers, extension educators and policymakers thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. In so doing, my hope is that this would elevate the reputation and visibility of the profession and impact of our applied economics work. Finally, I would like to see a clear articulation of the inclusive values that our association holds and greater effort to infuse these values into all that the association does.