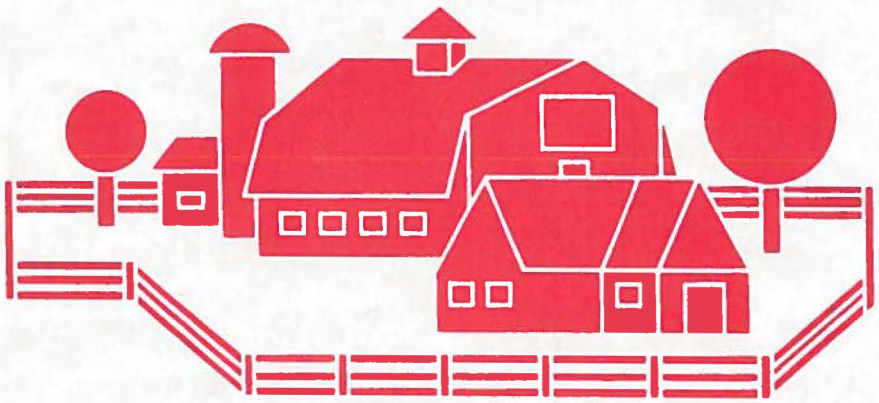
MM 401

North Central Region

FARM MANAGEMENT EXTENSION WORKSHOP

FARM MANAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR A NEW AGE



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BASIC ECONOMIC EDUCATION: COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND SEQUENCING

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, extension programs have focused on relatively short (one hour to one day) programs that provide participants with an "overview" of the topic being presented. Some have characterized these types of programs as "dog and pony shows" that have much flare, but leave participants with little real substance that will influence the manner in which they make economic decisions. An alternative approach has been the course or workshop approach that attempts to provide a more in-depth discussion of the topic under consideration. The general belief has been that this approach is much more difficult to sell to potential extension clientele, but one that does provide for a more realistic educational experience that can change the way people make decisions.

The purpose of this paper is to outline both advantages and disadvantages of the course approach to extension programs. The paper will also address some of the administrative issues associated with offering extension courses. Finally, the paper will conclude with a review of sequencing issues, i.e., do extension programs build upon each other, or are they simply a smorgasboard of topics?

"COURSES" VERSUS OTHER EXTENSION PROGRAMS

A quick review of extension efforts reveals a wide array of verbal descriptions for the various types of meetings offered. Some of the more common descriptions are:

- programs
- seminars
- workshops
- schools
- courses
- meetings

It is not my intention to attempt to develop a consistent or complete taxonomy of these terms. However, I would point out that within our own Agricultural Economics Department, we have "workshops" which range in length from 2 hours presented in one morning to 16 hours of instruction presented over 8 days. We also have "schools" which are shorter than some "workshops" or "seminars." In general, there is no consistent definition of the various types of extension programs offered. In this setting, it is difficult to discuss extension "courses" since the term may mean different things to different people.

To help sort this out, Table 1 identifies common characteristics of what I shall refer to as a "course." Courses will have many, but not all, of these characteristics. Most "seminars" and "workshops" would also fall into what I am broadly defining as a course. Most one or two hour extension programs, however, have few of these characteristics.

The marketing and management extension programs offered through the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Illinois are identified in Table 2. Out of 32 different programs which are currently offered, 10 are conducted as multi-day courses or workshops. The remainder range in length from 1-8 hours.

There appears to be no systematic procedure for ranking the success of these various programs. However, it does appear that multi-day courses or workshops have received far greater national recognition than the shorter programs. Examples of nationally recognized programs are the Farm Income Tax Schools, Pre-Retirement Planning, and the program on Coordinated Financial Statements.

POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF COURSE OFFERINGS

Potential advantages of course offerings over a short one or two-hour extension program are identified in Table 3. A brief review of each potential advantage follows.

By offering a course, it is possible to reduce the demand for county level extension programs, especially when mass communication systems are available. This particular advantage may grow over time as the number of farmers decline and the costs of travel for county extension programs increase.

The course approach to extension also allows for low level participation from many areas, an approach that is not possible with on-site meetings. For example, in a recent course on "Analyzing the Financial Strength of Your Farm Business" we had an enrollment of 319 people from 52 counties in the State of Illinois. That averages out to less than 7 people per county. An on-site 12 hour program for such a small audience is clearly infeasible.

The course approach also offers the opportunity of greater contact time than the one or two-hour program. This enhances the ability to provide a true educational experience for the participants rather than just a quick overview and restatement of the problem.

Our experience with the course approach has also demonstrated the importance of allowing participants some free time to contemplate materials presented, and then to return with questions. We found a great deal of interest in asking questions about materials from previous sessions once the participants had time to go home, think over what had been covered, and then relate it to their own business.

Table 1. Common Characteristics of Extension "Courses"

- Pre-enrollment Required
- Regularly Scheduled Multi-Day Meetings
- Partipants Given Homework Between Meetings
- Workbooks or Manuals Are Used in Instruction
- Pre- and/or Post Exams are Given
- Certificates of Achievement are Awarded
- Fees are Charged

TABLE 2. Marketing and Management Extension Programs, University of Illinois, 1985.

	PROGRAM	LENGTH OF TIME (hours)
	An In-Depth Look at Agricultural Estate Planning.....	2 1/2
*	Farm Income Tax Schools.....	13
	General Topics in Agricultural Law.....	2
	Agronomy, Crop Production or Crop Protection Days.....	1-2
	Choosing Optimum Soil Conservation Systems.....	2-4
	Computer Awareness Program.....	3
	Economics of Grain Drying and Storage Systems.....	2
	Farm Business: Analysis, Planning and Financial Management.....	2
*	Farm Business Organization.....	10
	Farm Machinery Economic Decisions.....	1-4
	Grain Farm Operation and Financial Planning in a Market Context.....	1-4
	Income Potentials for Dairy Operations in Illinois.....	2
*	Growing Older in Rural America: A Pre-Retirement Planning Program for Farm Couples.....	12-18
*	Planning a Successful Farm Business.....	12-18
*	Workshop: Farm Business Management--Using CAMPI.....	12
	Workshop: Farm Business and Financial Planning During the Transition Period.....	4
	Farm Family Stress.....	6
*	Farm Family Decisionmaking for Survival and Profit in the 80's.....	14
	Farm Appraisal Schools.....	4-5
	Farm Leases and Leasing Practices.....	2

Table 2 (Cont.)

	Farmland Value Clinics	2-4
*	Financial Statements: Preparation, Analysis and Interpretation	12
*	Farm Financial Management and Analysis	12
*	Farm Investment Analysis	8
	Market Outlook Update	1
	International Trade: Procedures, Prospects, Policies	2-8
	Grain and Livestock Price Outlook Meeting	1-2
	Farm Investment Analysis Meeting	2-4
	The Agricultural and Food Act of 1985 - The Meaning for Illinois Agriculture Farm Families, and Rural Communities	1-2
	The Politics of Hunger	1-2
*	Price Forecasting and Sales Management Workshops	16
	Livestock Marketing Workshop	2

* Conducted as a multi-day course or workshop.

Table 3. Potential Advantages of Course Offerings

- May Reduce Demand for County Level Extension Programs
- Allows for Low Level Participation from Many Areas
- Provides Greater Total Contact Time
- Allows Participants to Contemplate Materials and Ask Questions at Next Session
- Class Exercises Provide a Setting for Spirited Discussion and Interaction
- Reduces Travel Time for Extension Specialists (TeleNet)
- Provides a Ready Source of Information for County Level Tapes and Workbooks to be Used on Purchase or Loaner Basis from County Extension Offices
- Exams Provide Feedback to Participants and Reinforce Learning Experience
- May Allow One to Recapture Overhead Cost Through Course Fees
- Requires Considerable Attention to Program Content More Than One or Two Days Before The Meeting
- Provides a Mechanism for Identifying Participants and Tracking Progress

A closely related benefit of the course approach is that class exercises provide a spirited setting for discussion and interaction. When participants were asked to do homework, the problems they had in completing the homework provided a very useful source of discussion at subsequent meetings.

A very obvious benefit of a course which is offered over a telecommunications network is that it significantly reduces travel time of extension specialist. This allows the specialist more time for the development of materials and significantly reduces the amount of frustration resulting from cancellations or postponements due to weather conditions.

The course approach to extension also results in the generation of materials which can often be used independent of the extension specialist. For example, in a recent course we taped all of the presentation made by extension specialists. These audio tapes along with workbook materials can be quite easily provided to county extension offices to be made available for purchase or loaned to farmers who have an interest in pursuing the topic at their own pace and at a time convenient to them.

A course offering which includes a post exam also provides feedback to participants which reinforces their learning experience. Our experience suggests that even ungraded self examinations are taken seriously by partipants.

Because a course typically involves registration, there is a ready mechanism for identifying participants and, if desired, tracking their progress through surveys and/or examinations. Such tracking is much more difficult in one or two-hour sessions on current topics. The course approach also provides a ready mechanism for the collection of fees. Our experience suggests that fees are not a deterrent to a course approach although they may be to a one-hour presentation.

It appears that most extension specialists are like myself -- they start preparing for a one hour extension program sometimes as much as one or two days in advance of the program. With a course, this last minute preparation is not possible. Workbooks must be designed, produced, and distributed will in advance of the actual presentations. Thus, preparation may improve since considerable thought must be given to the course long before it is taught.

POTENTIAL DISADVANTAGES OF THE COURSE APPROACH

Some potential disadvantages of the course approach are identified in Table 4. A brief review of each follows.

The course approach often generates a much closer rapport with participants than short one or two hour lecture type programs. Consequently, participants feel much more comfortable in writing or calling

Table 4. Potential Disadvantages of Course Offerings

- May Generate Time Consuming Follow-up Phone Calls and Requests From Class Participants
- Requires Considerable Development Effort That Can Be Wasted If Course Fails
- May Generate Additional Requests for County Meetings That Need to be "Fended Off"
- May Not Provide "In Person" Contact That Enhances Teaching Programs
- Materials May Not Be the Very Latest Available

you with follow-up questions and requests for other types of information. Such follow-up phone calls and requests are encouraging, but they can also be very time consuming, thereby limiting more productive activities.

The course approach also requires considerable effort both for preparation of materials and for handling the administrative detail. There is considerable effort extended -- effort that may be wasted if the course fails to gain popular support.

Experience suggests that if participants have a good educational experience through the course approach, the word will spread. This may result in increased demand for county level meetings so that partipants can meet the instructors on a one-to-one basis. If these requests are excessive, they may need to be "fended off" by suggesting that participants attend another course.

If offered over a telecommunications system, a course does not provide participants with the "in person" contact that enhances teaching programs. Our experience suggests that such contact is not critical if there are very good workbook materials available for participants to follow during the course presentation.

Because course workbook materials must be prepared and distributed well in advance of the actual course offering, it is difficult to include the very latest material on a particular topic. While it is no problem to incorporate a discussion of such materials, participants will not have written materials in their workbooks.

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

Administration of extension courses tends to be more complex than the traditional one or two-hour program. A number of administrative issues associated with extension courses are identified in Table 5. A brief discussion of each of these issues follows.

Traditionally, the goal of extension has been to develop programs from the grass roots. Extension councils have been used effectively to suggest programs and speakers. Unfortunately, this has often resulted in haphazzard extension programs that sometimes includes three or four unrelated topics in a one-day program. In contrast, the content of courses is seldom suggested by extension advisors or extension councils. This occurs in virtually all course settings since students seldom have much direct input into the organization of new courses. Because courses tend to follow a top down approach, it is essential that extension specialists have a firm grasp of the educational needs of extension clients.

Another issue of concern in course offerings is the period of time between the end of enrollment and the beginning of the course. Traditional extension programs have required either no enrollment or enrollment of only several days before the program is offered. In the course we offered on

Table 5. Administrative Issues in Extension Courses

- Top Down Extension Course Development, But With Advice and Suggestions of Extension Advisers and County Councils
- Registration and Enrollment Period
- Fee Structure, Collection, and Distribution
- Examination Procedures, Grading, and Feedback
- Pre-Training of County Extension Advisers
- Handling Missed Classes
- Substitution of Courses for Traditional One-Half to One-Day Meetings

"Analyzing the Financial Strength of Your Farm Business," we set a cut-off of 3 weeks prior to the start of the course. This amount of time we felt was necessary to print workbooks and to distribute materials to county offices. By the cut-off date for enrollment, we had 119 individuals signed up. After the deadline, we were swamped with requests for late sign-up. We finally ended enrollment one week prior to the beginning of the course with over 300 people enrolled. Hence, only about one-third of the people were enrolled by the announced cut-off date. County extension advisers and extension participants are simply not accustomed to long delays between enrollment and the start of presentations. Administrative efforts on course registration are likely to be time consuming, but such administration can be handled by support staff.

Fees to be charged for courses should be set at a level designed to cover at least out-of-pocket costs for workbooks, mailings, etc. It remains a debatable issue whether fees should also be set at a high enough level to allow reimbursement of time for extension specialists. Collecting and distributing fees are another important administrative matter. County advisers are not accustomed to sending fees to a central location, so our experience has suggested considerable administrative problems in collecting the proper amount of fees and in obtaining the fees in a timely fashion.

Examinations are not a part of every extension course. But when exams are given in courses presented over a telecommunications system, administrative issues must be addressed. Who will give the exam? What kinds of protection from cheating, if any, will be used? Will exams be graded? If so, by whom? Will feedback on exams be given and if so when? All of these issues must be addressed before an examination can be given.

Our experience suggests that county advisors will want some pre-training on the course materials when the extension specialists is not on-site for the course. Advisers will also likely request information on how to deal with registrants who miss one or more sessions, but wish to make up for lost time.

A final administrative issue involves the extent to which a course offering will substitute for the more traditional one-half day meeting. Extenson specialists may need to set criteria by which to judge whether courses can serve as an acceptable substitute for county level meetings which cover the same basic topic.

COURSE SEQUENCING

Most educational institutions have well defined sequences of educational training. In elementary education one progresses through a series of grades (1-12) that denote a minimum level of competence in a variety of topics. In college, one also progresses, but not so much through a series of grades, but rather through completion of a prescribed number of courses. Many of these courses have prerequisites that assure a minimum level of competence prior to entering the next course.

In extension education programs, we appear to have moved away from the idea of sequenced learning. For example, if one reviews the extension programs offered in this and other states, one seldom finds even a hint of prerequisites to participation in the extension program. The problem this creates are quite clear: presentations must be pitched at a level that will be understood by the bulk of the participants. Too often this may mean we operate our programs at a level which is understandable to the least well prepared participant. Consequently, those who are well prepared may find the information too elementary or boring. If extension programs continue in this manner, we face the real possibility of being irrelevant to a majority of potential extension clientele.

One apparent solution to this problem is to create a more concerted effort to establish course sequencing in our extension programs. An excellent example of course sequencing is the tax education work currently conducted by Al Bock and his associates. Figure 1 identifies the sequencing involved in the tax education programs. Notice that a total of six different programs are offered, but that there is a logical sequence to these courses.

One can envision a somewhat similar approach in extension education in farm financial management (Figure 2). The most basic topic would likely start with farm record keeping. Next participants would move to a course on preparation of financial statements. From this point, participants would be ready to move to more advanced topics such as farm investment analysis, personal financial planning and analysis and interpretation of financial statements. Under each of these topics there are even more advanced or in-depth topics which could be covered.

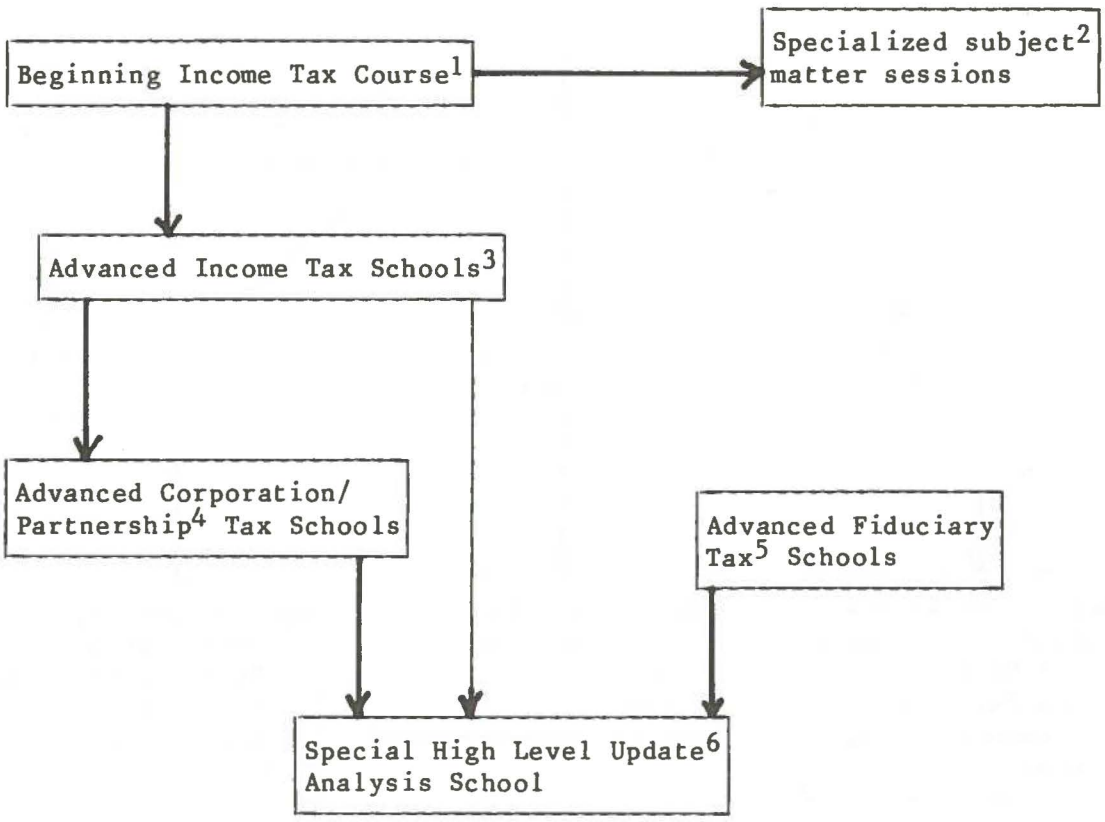
The hang-up with course sequencing of extension programs has often been the size of the audience. For county level meetings, it is true that prerequisites would likely limit participation to a very small number. However, as we move more toward telecommunication methods of delivery that transcend county boundaries, the need for sequencing is likely to grow.

SUMMARY

Extension education requires a continuing committment to excellence and innovation. Traditional extension programs in farm management have focused on one-half to one day programs designed for presentation on-site. Yet the changing environment of agriculture may dictate a need for change in our extension education programs. One such change may be a move toward a course approach to extension programs. This is not to say that all short extension programs should be eliminated, only that a better balance of the various approaches is needed.

A course approach to extension programs has both advantages and disadvantages. On balance, it appears that the advantages may outweigh the disadvantages. However, the administrative issues associated with a course approach to extension are complex and may require considerable staff time.

Figure 1. Tax Education Flow Chart[1]



1. Patterned after Ag. Ec. 203. Coursebook, overheads, tests, (Urbana administration), some outside instructors, 1,000-2,000 enrollees. $60 fee.

2. One-half day TeleNet sessions - regional.

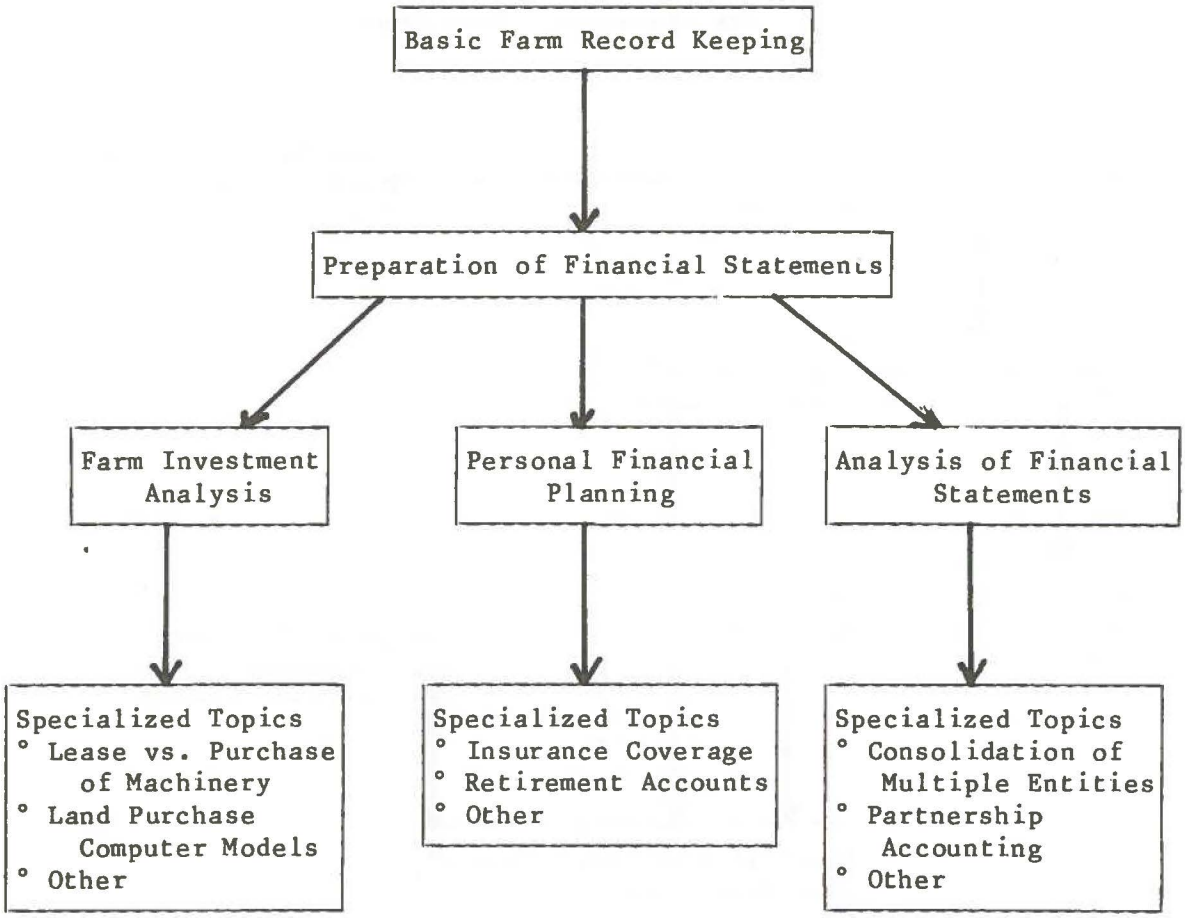
3. 4,300 enrollment - fed by Beginners program - 25 locations - outside speakers.

4-5. One to two-day face-to-face - four or five locations - outside speakers.

6. One-day TeleNet.

1. Source: C. Allen Bock, "Extension Education - The Course Approach," Working paper for Department of Agricultural Economics State Advisory Committee, January 1985.

Figure 2. Suggested Farm Financial Management Education Flow Chart



Extension programs have often failed to develop a logical sequence of building upon past information. The course approach to extension, particularly those offered over telecommunications systems, are quite easily adapted to a sequenced approach to education.