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FARMER COOPERATIVES  
FOR  
THE FUTURE

A WORKSHOP  
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## STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES FOR EDUCATION RELATED TO FARMER COOPERATIVES

*David L. Holder*  
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Most of the papers presented in this workshop have made reference to the need for education. Cooperative education covers a broad spectrum, including on-campus resident instruction, Extension Service, Agricultural Cooperative Service and other USDA agencies, as well as cooperatives themselves, and their own educational institution, the American Institute of Cooperation. What do we know about cooperative education that will help us develop an efficient strategy for the future? The more I ponder that question, the more I am convinced that the topic of education is a subject in need of research. We need to do more than extend the results of research. We need to research the role of education itself. I urge you not to overlook education as a subject of research.

Many people have rebuked the universities for decreasing the educational emphasis on cooperatives. John Claar, former Extension Director, University of Illinois, suggests university emphasis on cooperatives may go in cycles related to crises, and that the perceived down trend has been due to a lack of demand for university involvement. But we need to be careful that we have the whole picture when we make generalizations about a declining emphasis on cooperative education.

We're too quick to take a few observations — a retiring professor, a canceled course — and draw major conclusions. Even if our casual observations correctly identify a trend, scientific data collection and analysis are needed not only to know what is happening in education, but to discover how to make education work.

Except for on-campus instruction, we have very little reliable data on what has been actually happening at the university level. Agricultural Cooperative Service and

others (Groves, Torgerson) have periodically surveyed land grant institutions (including 1890s) and documented a decline in the number of cooperative courses offered during the 1960's and 1970's, and little change in the 1980's. But even those surveys omit institutions outside the land grant system.

Extension Service can give you an idea of the variety of educational programs it offers, but Extension lacks quantitative data and has not verified any trends. Our data on effectiveness is also scarce.

Cooperatives engage in a variety of educational activities. Have they increased or decreased, or changed their emphasis, in the last couple of decades? I don't think we know. As a proxy measure, we can look at the American Institute of Cooperation's membership and dues collections. For the first 7 of the last 10 years; memberships were relatively constant, then declined 25 percent in the last 3 years. During the period of constant membership, total dues increased at a compound rate of 10 percent a year. Since then, dues collections have decreased a total of 16 percent, and further declines are projected.

As we dig into education issues, we might consider other questions. Is cooperative education a factor in cooperative survival? How effective is education to the survival of an individual cooperative and to the survival of the cooperative community? Are current educational programs properly focused? Are we using the most cost effective educational methods? Have you heard about the "educational gap" hypothesis? It postulates that there are gaps in cooperative education. As a result, some people are seeking funds to find and identify these gaps. Do more resources need to be allocated or current resources reallocated?

The American Institute of Cooperation is making some attempt to answer a few of the questions being raised about cooperative education. With help from Agricultural Cooperative Service, AIC surveyed its members asking their opinions on educational needs, audiences, types of programs and responsibilities for education. That is a start, but we need more than a collection of opinions. We also need expert analysis to see if cooperative's perceptions square with reality of what is needed and how it should be done.

In the last few years, I believe, cooperatives have renewed their interest in universities as a source of education and research. My limited observations are that closer working relationships are gradually being built. Some cooperatives are supporting university budget requests and supplementing university budgets. Most notable has been the recent increased activity in sponsoring university cooperative centers and chairs in Ohio, Kansas, Missouri, and Minnesota. New York cooperatives have been successful in obtaining a line item in the state university budget at Cornell for cooperative education. There is a new college text book on cooperatives underway, drawing on the talents of a number of authors and under the leadership of David Cobia. I also know a few "newer" faculty members that are interested in working in the cooperatives area. Mostly what they need is some tangible encouragement. If in fact there has been a down turn in the cycle, it is possibly beginning to make an upswing.

I don't feel uncomfortable with the idea of cycle in cooperative education. In fact, it may be the basis for a strategy for education. There have been, and will be, certain times in the history of cooperatives when educational needs are greater than at other times. Cooperative and university managers should allocate and reallocate resources where they are needed most, where they produce the greatest marginal benefit. Unfortunately, crises often seem to come in bunches and several issues clamor for additional resources at the same time. As a result, cooperative education may not always get needed attention when cooperative emergencies arise.

Perhaps we can anticipate crises and prepare people in advance. After all, education is often a longterm process. There is also a need for a maintenance level of education to train new generations about cooperative concepts and prepare them for leadership roles. Cooperative education, then, should include a constant effort to meet maintenance needs plus a variable portion to meet special needs. Much of the concern in the past decade seems to be that we may have short-changed even the maintenance level of education. There is also a need to increase education programs dealing with the current cooperative issues reviewed earlier in this workshop.

Another aspect of the strategy must be cooperation among and between cooperatives and universities. Cooperation is necessary to accomplish mutual understanding, identify education needs, conduct programs, and ensure resources for those programs. I think the most effective programs happen when cooperatives and universities work together.

For most of this session we want to focus on Extension Service's involvement in cooperative education. Though the tactics have changed over the years, the basic Smith-Lever strategy of 1914 still seems appropriate for cooperative education... "To aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same..." The act goes on to say this will be done by "giving instruction and practical demonstrations."

As I have evaluated Extension programs and tried to document their impact, I think we have often missed the mark. The typical one-night stand or the "blow-in, blow-off, blow-out" approach cannot accomplish the objective to "encourage application of the same." People are not convinced of the need to apply new ideas that fast. As we become serious about evaluating our educational effort, we are learning to emphasize intensive educational efforts with well targeted audiences.

Our approach in this session is to survey some programs that meet the Smith-Lever

challenge of effectiveness. Furthermore, we want to provide some practical insights for program development — ideas that you can take home and use to improve your programs. I have asked each participant to focus more on the process of program development and implementation than on specific program content. They will describe educational opportunities and needs; tell how their universities work with cooperatives; explain their successes and, if they will, their failures; and indicate their future program plans.

In structuring the session, we anticipated a variety of approaches based on the different cooperative environments within which Extension must work. These environments are characterized by a “dominant centralized cooperative”, a “dominant federated cooperative,” and a “strong state cooperative council and active bank for cooperatives.” We will also discuss multistate “regional educational efforts” and a “national educational effort.” The national effort, by the way, is not an Extension based program, but close enough that we want to claim it anyway.

Presenting the highlights of these Extension Programs are James Bell, Virginia Tech; David Barton, Kansas State University; Roger Ginder, Iowa State University; Bill Thomas, University of Georgia; and Charles Cramer, University of Missouri.

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