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THE "VITAL ISSUES" PROGRAM IN MONTANA

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Objectives

1. To increase awareness and understanding of significant problems of education, welfare, economic growth, taxation, and finance facing Montana people—community or group problems that cannot be solved by citizens individually.
2. To determine what lay people believe are the key problems in the above listed subject areas.
3. To test the reaction of the public to an intensive educational effort in public affairs.
4. To test the public reaction to a self-administered program of education.

Origin of Project

The project originated with the college administrators including the president, the deans, and the extension director. The original objective was to conduct a study of the school organization and finance situation in one county. The more comprehensive study on the broader scale emerged. Contributing factors were:

1. Tight financial situation in county and state budgets. Some deficit financing by the state and some counties.
2. Financial problems arising from increased population. Example—rapid increase in college enrollment and potential.
3. Conflict of citizens on merits of sales tax, income tax, property tax as a method of raising revenue.
4. Grant of \$40,000 from the Fund for Adult Education to conduct public affairs education.
5. A history of interest and activity in public affairs by college president and dean of agriculture.

Development of Project

1. By a committee with representation from:
 - a. Extension Service
 - (1) Administration
 - (2) Supervision

- (3) Specialists
 - (4) Information
- b. Research and teaching
 - (1) Administration
 - (2) Subject matter
- c. Divisions cooperating
 - (1) Agricultural economics
 - (2) Education
 - (3) Information
 - (4) Extension Service
- 2. Development of fact sheets
 - a. Selection of the subject for each of the six fact sheets by a committee. Selection based on problem areas of state-wide interest and concern.
 - b. Development of brief outline of each fact sheet by specialist and review by a subcommittee.
 - c. Development of detailed outline by assigned subject matter specialist and review by subcommittee.
 - d. Draft of fact sheet by subject matter specialist and review and comment by individual committee members.
 - e. Rewrite by professional writer (under contract)
 - f. Review by original author.
 - g. Processing and publication by information staff.

Publicity, Promotion, and Use

- 1. Promotional leaflet, "It's Up To You," for use beginning two to three months before scheduled discussion group meetings.
- 2. Advance newspaper releases (4) to be used the four weeks prior to scheduled dates of the discussion meetings.
- 3. Current situation newspaper stories (6) to inform public of progress of discussion groups in the county.
- 4. Radio scripts (4) to be used the four weeks prior to scheduled discussion meetings.
- 5. Spot radio announcements (7) very brief.

6. Fact sheet news releases (6) one release for each of the six fact sheets summarizing material in the fact sheet.
7. Poster for window and billboard display.

Aids

1. Operating handbook for county agents.
2. Some suggestions and form letters for working with clubs, churches, and community organizations.
3. A working handbook for the Vital Issues community or county chairman.
4. Organizational aids for working with organizations, committees, school teachers, and public libraries.

Problems

1. In an undertaking of this kind can you avoid:
 - a. Friction between administration and staff?
 - b. Negative attitudes and mental blocks toward new undertaking by assigned staff members?

Varying degrees of the above conditions are considered to have existed among our assigned state staff and among our county staff.

2. Some actions or lack of action assumed to have contributed to friction, negative attitudes, and blocks:
 - a. Handed down program. Staff not involved in decision to undertake project.
 - b. Employment of off-campus professional assistance without understanding of need and acceptance by local assigned staff.
 - c. Involvement of larger than usual number of local staff in one project.
 - d. Assignment of additional responsibility or duty for many of staff.
3. Possible solution: Better informed staff and more participation by them in planning and development phases of project so objectives and operations of the project are fully understood.

Assistance

The assistance of Research Associates was important in developing the concept and in outlining the project in all its details. The planning and execution of a project of this nature would have been virtually impossible without assistance of this nature.