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DEVELOPMENT AND EXECUTION OF A PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION PROGRAM

Metes and Bounds of Public Policy Education

*John O. Dunbar, Extension Economist
Purdue University*

Public policy extension specialists can best take advantage of the opportunities which lie ahead by: (1) concentrating on education and letting the public make decisions, (2) developing an education program built around issues, (3) using sound methodology, (4) carefully selecting audiences with whom to work, and (5) following time-tested principles.

BE EDUCATORS—LET THE PUBLIC DECIDE

Making adjustments in our institutions and policies involves three main tasks: (1) understanding the various problems and the possible solutions, (2) making policy decisions, and (3) carrying out changes. Extension has the important responsibility of helping with the first and third tasks. Responsibility for making policy decisions rests with the people.

The major goal of extension public affairs programs is to develop in individuals: (1) an active interest in public affairs problems, (2) an understanding of the facts, issues, alternatives, principles, and values involved, (3) ability to make judgments on the basis of critical examination of the evidence and logical thinking, and (4) the desire and ability to participate effectively in the solution of public problems.

Once an extension man decides that he is going to be an educator and let other people make the policy decisions, his work in public affairs takes on deeper significance. Policy decisions made by people for whom he provides an educational opportunity will be based on better knowledge and understanding. Also, once his techniques are properly developed and his role is understood, his enemies will disappear. Politicians and members of pressure groups will no longer say, "What is extension doing in politics?"

HEART OF THE PROGRAM—ISSUES

Every school of agriculture has a curriculum, a series of courses designed to bring students to a higher level of knowledge concerning the world in which they live. Similarly, a policy education pro-

gram must be built around a series of issues of sufficient interest to attract an audience. An on-going program should consider one or more issues every year, depending on the manpower available to staff the program. Over a period of years, it should consider numerous issues. Participants in such an educational program will gradually become skillful in solving public problems.

The most important, most difficult, and most rewarding feature of this approach is preparation of a statement of what the issue really is—the nature of the controversy.

The heart of an issue is the broad goal of the group involved. In other words, it is the real, immediate policy objective. For example, if the objective of farm policy is “improved farm incomes,” one set of alternatives applies, including demand expansion, supply adjustment, free prices, etc. If it is “to bring farm production into adjustment with demand,” a different set of alternatives applies including free prices, voluntary land retirement, mandatory land retirement, and across the board market quotas. Such objectives must be clear, concise, realistic, and easy for people to understand.

Take another example. In the early 1950's, a problem arose concerning extension of old-age and survivors insurance programs to cover farmers. Actually the issue was, “What should be done to provide incomes for old people and others who cannot take care of themselves?” Alternatives in this case were:

1. Let their children, friends, relatives, or the church take care of them.
2. Let public welfare programs provide for them through taxation and relief.
3. Extend old-age and survivors insurance to cover them.
4. Some combination of the three.

Any of these alternatives would provide for old farm people who could not take care of themselves. However, each would do it in a different way, and the results would be different.

Thus, once the policy objective is stated, the educator can say, “Alternative A will achieve this objective and here is how it will do it. Similarly, alternatives B and C will achieve this objective and here is how they will do it.” Following this, he can say, “Now, here is what will happen if you choose alternative A or B or C.” With a clear statement of the issue (broad policy goal and alternatives to achieve it), the foundation is laid for a clear-cut educational

program. Failure to get issues stated clearly is probably the biggest millstone around the necks of policy educators.

Incidentally, sometimes several men must work together two or three days to arrive at a statement of one policy issue. *That is about two words per day per man.*

Rarely is an issue solved in less than two years. Local or county issues in which relatively few people are involved usually take less time to solve than national issues. State issues usually take from two to ten years for solution. Many national issues involving vast numbers of people with many different points of view usually take longer. Thus, time is available to develop an educational program on most issues.

USE SOUND METHODOLOGY

Most extension men with experience in public policy education are now following the problem-alternatives-consequences approach to public affairs education programs. This approach is as follows:

1. Clearly identify the problem and its causes.
2. Clearly set forth the issue in a positive statement, such as "what should be done to meet the Communist threat."
3. Present all known proposed alternative solutions and get understanding of how each of these alternatives would work if put into effect.
4. Analyze the consequences of following each alternative in terms of criteria which are important to the audience.
5. Leave to the audience the appraisal of the various alternative solutions in light of its own values and goals.

GROUP AUDIENCES PROPERLY FOR MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS

At any given time most individuals are interested mainly in only one or a very few issues and not so interested in others.

Some people already know a great deal about certain issues; others know very little. People who understand the nature and causes of a problem are not interested in a long discussion concerning "why this problem is important." What they want is knowledge of how various alternatives would achieve the policy objective they have in mind.

Due to these and other variations in the interest and knowledge of individuals, we need to divide our clientele into different groups

in order to set up effective policy learning situations into which we can draw them.

One such division of audience groups is as follows:

1. *State policy study groups* (30-50 "king makers"). These are the people to whom congressmen, elected officials of farm organizations, and others look for advice and support. For best educational results, elected representatives or officers of organizations who have a position to maintain should not be included in these groups.

2. *District policy conferences* (groups of 10 to 15 thought leaders per county from 10 to 12 counties). Divide the state into districts and ask the county agent to bring two to four carloads of leaders from each county. This can be an all-day meeting with one issue presented in the morning and one in the afternoon. Present the issue and divide the audience into small groups to discuss it with their peers.

3. *County study groups* (30-40 of the best thinkers in the county or city or township). These groups can be brought together by county agents in almost an ideal classroom situation for a series of three to five evening meetings. This allows time to develop understanding of problems, issues, alternatives, and consequences. This technique is ideal for developing new policy leaders.

4. *Home economics leader-training groups* (15-50 leaders who will carry the lesson back to their home economics club). Provided with understanding through a meeting, a good discussion outline, and some illustrative hand-out materials, these leaders can conduct informative discussions with their local home economics club members on many issues.

5. *Open meetings for the general public* (50-100 general audience). If enough citizens are interested, these meetings can be held on a local or county basis.

6. *Self-administered discussion groups* (1,000-50,000 interested citizens). Good organization, with well-chosen discussion group leaders, a training program for leaders, and well-prepared, written, supplemental material are prerequisites for successful use of this technique.

7. *State-wide forums* (300-1,000 people). This type of meeting provides an ideal medium for bringing outstanding public policy leaders before a large audience to discuss a hot issue. For best results, the issue must be carefully selected. One speaker should represent each alternative.

8. *The masses.* This group includes television, newspaper, and magazine audiences.

9. *Other.* This group includes service clubs, etc.

With the limited resources available for public affairs education in every state today, all these groups can hardly be reached on even one issue in one year. Consequently, maximum effectiveness in use of scarce extension resources depends upon careful selection of both the issue to be discussed and the groups to which the educational program is beamed.

USE TIME-TESTED PRINCIPLES

Other important principles for development of a successful public affairs program are as follows:

1. *Develop your own extension clientele.* Extension can fly its flag under the auspices of non-extension groups only so long as what the group hears does not conflict with its special interest.

2. *Have an understanding with pressure and special interest groups that you are not performing their function.* The function of these groups is to study the issue, take a stand, and try to get their point of view accepted. If the policy educator wishes to command their respect, he should conduct his work on a professional basis and avoid interfering with their role in policy development. This means that: (1) in educational meetings no resolutions should be passed, and (2) educators must deny themselves the pleasure of writing in pressure group house organs. Educational materials and services should be made available to all pressure groups in the same way a doctor serves patients of all races, creeds, and colors.

3. *Strike when the issue is hot.* Since people seek information only when they have some intensity of interest, timing is extremely important in public affairs programs. This means that extension personnel must be studying problems, issues, and alternatives continuously—then offer an educational program from the time public interest begins to grow until the interest wanes or the issue is settled. Many issues grow hot and cold from one year to the next; such issues must be alternately emphasized and de-emphasized.

4. *Be a professional.* The policy educator who makes a high quality, competent analysis of an issue based upon all the available information and follows sound methodology in presenting it need not fear that somebody will “run him into a corner.” The policy educator who develops a reputation for objectivity and fairness has

the satisfaction of having people on both sides of an issue feel comfortable and welcome when they come into his office to “talk it over.”

5. *Specialize on one problem area.* Some of the most successful policy educators in the United States have devoted most of their time over a period of several years to a particular policy area at the local, state, national, or international level. When one issue is settled, they move to another.

6. *Team up with other educators in developing a program on a particular issue.* Two heads are better than one. Policy extension education is no place for the lone wolf or the prima donna. To have a professional colleague make suggestions for improvement is far better than to have your analysis torn up in public by an amateur.

7. *Have a long-range program.* To those who use his services, the policy specialist’s time is a free good. If he does not allocate it in such a way that he can develop depth of knowledge on a policy problem or issue, he must pay the price of being superficial and ineffective.

8. *Have faith in people, education, and our democratic form of government.* People have good judgment and will make sound decisions if they have pertinent facts and information on which to base them. Education automatically results in a change in their behavior. Some of the most satisfying moments of an educator’s life come when he observes a person change his behavior as he receives new knowledge. If people make a wrong decision today or tomorrow, our democratic system provides them an opportunity to change it—and they will. Make haste slowly—one issue at a time. Rome was not built in a day.