THE KANSAS PUBLIC FINANCE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

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The educational program in state and local government finance conducted by the Kansas Cooperative Extension Service has passed the road test with an inexperienced driver. It has been successful in its mission. It is living proof that a young, inexperienced extension specialist can tackle the most controversial subject in the public arena and survive. It has worked because the method employed is sound.

THE PROBLEM

Why a program dealing with taxes instead of, for instance, welfare, pollution, or farm prices? Selection of a topic for a public affairs education program is of utmost importance. If the "wrong" subject is discussed at the "wrong" time, the program is doomed to failure. The subject must be controversial enough to generate interest but not so controversial that rational discussion is impossible. When the trenches are dug and the guns are in position, the time for war, not education, has arrived.

The number one public issue in Kansas for the past several years has been how to finance the services provided by the state government and its local subdivisions. It has been vigorously debated and is currently the top-priority issue which will be put before the voters in the gubernatorial campaign and the state legislature in the next session. Clearly, the past year was the right time for an educational program in state and local government finance.

Numerous agricultural, business, and labor leaders throughout the state requested that the university conduct an educational program on the subject of taxes. We embarked on this program, knowing that it would deal with a highly volatile and controversial subject but also recognizing that the Cooperative Extension Service of Kansas State University has an obligation to help its clientele understand this number one public issue.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

The objective of any public affairs education program should be to increase the level of understanding among the people so that they and their leadership acquire a broader base for making public decisions. The objective of this particular public affairs education program was to increase the level of understanding of how the functions of state and local government are and could be financed. In essence, our purpose was to discuss the tax mix, that is, how much from property, sales, and income.

There are many methods for conducting public affairs education. However, with limited resources, we decided that we could best attain our objective by working with the power structure of the state. In a government such as ours, a few people at the top of the power structure have the most influence in public decisions. If an educational program is to have the most impact, it must reach these top decision makers. These people are busy and do not have time, nor will they take time, to read bulletins or listen to professors on radio or television. The best way to reach them is "eyeball to eyeball." You must face them directly and discuss the problem if you intend to have any impact on their thinking.

Once we elected to work with the decision makers, we had next to adopt a practical, pragmatic approach for working with them. Public decisions are made in the political arena and are not scientific but judgmatic. These decisions are based on facts, what are thought to be facts, and values. The decision makers are quite capable of determining the correct solution. They are not about to relinquish their decision-making role to a professor. I suspect that if I had attempted to tell the people of Kansas how to solve the tax problem, they would have concluded that they had hired the wrong person and looked elsewhere.

To us it was clear that the "alternatives approach" was the tool for the job. This approach first seeks to define the problem clearly, that is, to discuss the problem and not the symptoms. Second, it lists the alternative courses of action and their probable consequences. The decision is then up to the people, and at no time should the discussion leader state which alternative he prefers.

Briefly then, the public affairs education framework has five major stages:

1. Selection of a timely and controversial subject.
2. Identification of the decision makers.
3. A concise definition of the problem.
4. A discussion of the alternative courses of action and their probable consequences.

5. The selection of the "best" alternative *by the public*.

What does it take to succeed in using the alternatives approach to conduct an educational program on a controversial subject? First, it takes a feel for the practical. People just want to know what time it is; they do not want to know how to construct a clock. Sound theory and economic models provide a basis for such a program. However, most sophisticated econometric models are not very useful tools in discussing "nuts and bolts" problems with decision makers.

This approach also has a philosophical basis. It requires a faith in the democratic process and a willingness to let the people decide the issue. In the final analysis, we must believe that the people in their wisdom will come up with the "best" solution. Also, this approach requires objectivity. No individual is perfectly objective. But somehow, if an educator strives for objectivity, the public will place greater trust in him, and the atmosphere will be more conducive to learning. Our goal must be to educate and not to advocate.

METHODOLOGY

Since the success of our program was primarily due to the method employed, let us examine this method in detail.

Legitimization

I mentioned that many agricultural, business, and labor organization leaders requested that the university conduct a program on taxes. They had to be convinced that the alternatives approach was the proper way to conduct such a program. For example, in Kansas we have a taxpayers organization. This organization is interested primarily in property tax relief. Consequently, its members put considerable pressure on the university to take their side of the issue. Before we could proceed, they had to be convinced that the university was in the business of education and not espousing a cause. So we had to make it perfectly clear that Extension would not take up their cause, but rather would provide the public with facts pertinent to the problem, rather than myths and propaganda.

If an extension specialist (or agent) wishes to be successful in public affairs education, he needs to develop rapport with the top decision makers of the state. He must work with them, learn to know them on a personal basis, and gain their respect. His program must be legitimized by the people who make the decisions both on the state level and on a local community basis. This is especially true if the specialist happens to be a young, inexperienced, long-haired kid from out of state. Once the program and the specialist are legitimized with the power structure in the state, implementation can begin.

Research

The person who wishes to develop a practical educational program of this nature must study the problem, collect relevant information, and put it into a useful form for public consumption. One of the startling facts I learned was that most of the data already published is not in a useful form. And so it takes a considerable amount of digging and interpolating to develop the necessary information. For example, if the decision makers are interested in changing the tax mix, it is extremely important for them to know how much increase in the income tax would be required to lower property taxes 10 percent. Another example is the substitution of local sales and income taxes for the property tax. We currently have a law in Kansas which allows voters of local political subdivisions to do just this. So it is extremely relevant, for instance, that they know how much property tax relief can be obtained by imposing a local one-cent sales tax. Likewise, the decision makers are quite interested in how Kansas compares with its surrounding neighbors. These are just two examples of the relevant information that needs to be put together in useful form before going to the field with an educational program.

Agent Acquaintance

The success of any program conducted by a state specialist requires enthusiastic support of the county staff. Therefore, being a newcomer to the staff, I spent several months getting acquainted with the county agents and the home agents in Kansas. One person described it as going on a "joy ride." It may have appeared to be that, but it was most necessary. I discussed with them what the public problems were in the state and how the Extension Service might better serve its clientele in these areas.

Agent Acceptance

After the program had been legitimized and the relevant information collected and put together in a booklet, we were ready to take the program to the field. We held five seminars, one in each of the extension administrative districts in the state. These meetings were designed for the local county agents and their lay leaders to see what we had to offer. Our purpose was to gain agent understanding and acceptance. We did this by providing county extension personnel with an opportunity to hear and see the program in action.

At the end of each of these district meetings, we set up a schedule for that area to hold county meetings. In addition, some time was spent with the agents discussing how we would set up these meetings and how we would conduct them. This was a most important step, since we were asking them to depart from tradition and to hold meetings on the hottest subject in the state.

Logistics

We held approximately eighty seminars and meetings throughout the state with approximately 3,000 people in attendance. Meetings were set up by the local county personnel for local leaders only. The general public was not invited. In the beginning, this caused somewhat of a problem since Extension has traditionally had public meetings where everyone was invited; and too often the success of these meetings was judged in terms of how many people attended. We were interested in quality more than quantity.

To help agents in identifying decision makers, we provided them with a list of positions normally associated with the local power structure. We told them that we had no idea who the people in these positions were and that the success of these meetings depended very much upon their ability to ferret out the influential leaders.

The agents were also provided with a letter of introduction to use in announcing this meeting to the power structure. They were told that in order to get the right people to attend these meetings, a follow-up with a personal visit or a phone call would be required.

We also requested that a luncheon or dinner be a part of the meetings. This is a crucial factor in the success of the meetings. It afforded those in attendance the opportunity to get to know each other better and to discuss the problem. It also served as a break in what was a rather lengthy session. Most of the meetings were held from 10:00 to 3:00; however, others started at about 4:30 and lasted until about 9:30 or 10:00 p.m.

By personally inviting the decision makers to a discussion-type meeting, we were able to secure their support and attendance.

Local news media people were also invited to attend but were told in no uncertain terms that no advance announcement was to be made. Every attempt was made to keep the troublemakers and hell-raisers out of the audience.

Teaching Aids

A 75-page booklet of tables containing relevant information on the problem was used as a teaching tool for the meetings. The booklet contains no narrative. A discussion-type meeting for decision makers does not require a prepared narrative, but rather tables containing pertinent facts which the individual reader can look at and understand without an elaborate explanation. Decision makers do not need to be "spoon-fed." They can interpret for themselves.

Since the beginning of this program, 10,000 copies of the booklet have been distributed, many by request from government officials, community leaders, and agricultural, labor, business, and other professional and nonprofessional people. Numerous state legislators attested to the book's relevance and usefulness by quoting facts and figures from it and requesting additional copies for their constituents.

Seminar Outline

The meetings were five-hour seminars. At the beginning, an attempt was made to get acquainted; in other words, to get members of the audience to know the speaker and the speaker to know them—their occupation, their public leadership position, whether or not they held a public office, just enough about them so the speaker felt comfortable with his audience. The next part of the program was a frank and deliberate attempt to make it crystal clear that the professor did not have the answer to the problem and that his purpose was simply to discuss the facts. The seminars then proceeded according to the following format:

1. Definition and clarification of the problem.
2. A historical analysis of nationwide developments in social and economic conditions and their effect on state and local government expenditures and tax patterns.
3. A comparative analysis of the current situation in Kansas and neighboring states.
4. A discussion of alternative solutions to the Kansas tax problem and their probable consequences.

A Decision-Making Experience

The last hour of the meeting provided the participants with actual experience in developing a new tax mix. For this, the local extension agent divided the audience into groups, trying to include in each group a cross section of the audience. For example, each group contained a farmer, a labor union man, and an individual from the chamber of commerce whenever possible. Each group was challenged to develop a tax package that was acceptable to the majority of the people in their group. To do this, they were told to pick one of three alternatives outlined to them in the formal part of the program. The three alternatives were:

1. Finance state and local government about the same as it is currently being financed.
2. Place less emphasis upon revenue from property taxes and more upon revenue from nonproperty sources.
3. Place more emphasis upon revenue from property taxes and less upon revenue from nonproperty sources.

If a group picked the second alternative, which was lowering the property tax, we asked them to decide how much they would lower the property tax and then how they would make up the difference. If they chose the income tax, for example, they could get from the booklet the information required to determine what kind of an income tax rate would be required to lower the property tax by various percentages. The same procedure was used for the sales tax. The groups were also given the option to do this on a state or local basis.

The challenge was deliberately framed in the context that if the same amount of money were going to be spent next year in the state of Kansas as during this past year, how would you raise the money? In other words, what kind of a tax mix would you design to support government?

At the end of each discussion, we had each group report back and then we had a question and answer session. In the final analysis, it was the audience that provided the answer to the question: What should the tax mix be?

Where From Here?

The question may now be asked, where do we go from here? First, these meetings have been successful and have made this program well known to the elected officials in the state. Since then, I have had several opportunities to serve as a technician for these elected officials. This has been true with the governor's office, the state legislature, and currently many of the candidates for public office. Of course, at no time do I take a stand on the issue. The officials outline what they would like to accomplish, and then we sit down and work it out.

At the present time, we have eighty meetings on the same subject scheduled throughout the state for this coming fall and spring. Currently, the 1972 edition of the booklet, "Financing State and Local Government in Kansas," is at the printers. Fifteen thousand copies will be distributed this year. In the words of one state legislator who attended several of these seminars, "When the people are informed through a meeting like this, the job of legislating is much easier."

SUMMARY

Why did this work? It appears to me that there are four reasons:

1. The information presented was relevant. It was stripped of all political and academic rhetoric.

2. It was presented in the layman's language with 75 percent subject matter and 25 percent entertainment. Learning must be fun; otherwise, the audience's attention span is rather limited.

3. At no time did the professor attempt to tell the audience how state and local government should be financed. This was left to their judgment.

4. The alternatives approach, which is the only fool-proof educational method when the subject is controversial, was used, and the procedures in this approach were strictly followed.