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Approaches for Doing Public Affairs Education

*Summary of a group discussion of program methods led
by John O. Dunbar*

Deciding the most efficient way to conduct a public affairs education program for individual counties is a major problem confronting agricultural extension personnel. Each of the 48 states has a different system for doing this job. Some states, having limited manpower and resources, conduct this work on an extensive basis. Others with more manpower and resources conduct it more intensively.

The task force presentation by the Iowa county extension agents at this conference was an excellent example of using one part of a state's extension resources to help teach various groups in an Iowa county. Art Mauch demonstrated how he reaches county groups in Michigan through meetings of service clubs. Dan Sturt indicated how television audiences are reached simultaneously in many Michigan counties and described how he had conducted agricultural policy discussions with special groups of young farmers. Each of these demonstrations: (1) included a somewhat different level of policy information because the material was designed for a particular audience, (2) was presented by a person or persons with certain skills and knowledge, and (3) was presented through a particular medium. Good visual aids were used in each demonstration.

Since the resources for policy education work are more or less limited in every state, it is important to make a thorough analysis of what is to be taught, to whom it is to be taught, and what media should be used. For example:

1. What is the nature of the subject matter to be taught? Is it philosophical or general background information designed to serve as a basis for public policy decision? Is it specifically oriented toward some public policy decision which is going to be made? Or is it an explanation of a policy which has already been adopted and a discussion of how to adjust individual operations to the decision?

2. What people in the county are to be reached with this program? Is the objective to reach all the people in the county—all ages and all occupations with all types of interest? Or is it to reach only people who may have an influence on some particular public policy decision?

3. What people are available for this teaching job? Are adequate numbers of highly skilled, technically trained people available to do

this work? Or are the highly trained people very limited in number, making it necessary to rely upon other teaching resources?

4. What media are most adaptable for use by available teachers in teaching particular information to particular groups? These media range from the very general mass media down to one individual person talking directly to another.

It is recognized that teaching people a philosophy from which to draw values, providing general background information, and developing understanding of the implications of public policies already adopted are all important phases of policy education. Nevertheless, public policy education is most effective when it concerns particular issues. Previous discussions at this conference indicate that much more work needs to be done in: (1) defining particular public problems and their causes, (2) outlining all the possible alternative solutions to the problem, and (3) analyzing the specific economic consequences of each alternative.

Obviously, a public policy decision is made on the basis of not only economic but also political and social consequences. Therefore, in teaching adults, who have more or less definite sets of values, it is helpful to create an environment in which they can appraise the economic consequences of various policy alternatives in light of other values while these consequences are fresh in their minds. It is also helpful to create an environment conducive to discussion of these consequences with their peers.

If we accept the objective of defining problems and their causes, outlining alternative solutions, and discussing the consequences of each alternative, we must determine what group should be reached, who can do the teaching, and what media are available. These must all be combined into a policy education program which will have the most effect in both the short and the long run. This calls for more careful analysis of the possible groups in a county, teaching resources available, and possible media. These are listed in Table 1.

When groups of policy educators were asked at this conference to indicate for the groups listed in Column 1 of Table 1, who should do the teaching and what media should be used, their answers contained the following general principles:

1. Highly trained experienced individual specialists or groups of specialists should be used for training key policy leaders, and meetings would be the best medium for this purpose.

2. County personnel without much specialized training can probably be very effective with other farm groups, also nonfarm groups,

TABLE 1. COUNTY GROUPS, EDUCATIONAL MEDIA, AND TEACHING RESOURCES INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING A COUNTY EXTENSION PROGRAM IN AGRICULTURAL POLICY

County Groups to be Reached	Media	Teaching Resources
1. Political groups	1. Individual personal contact	1. Agricultural policy specialist teams
2. Key policy leaders	2. Small group "teacher-pupil" discussion groups	2. Part-time agricultural economics specialist
3. Farm organizations	3. Medium-sized (50 to 100) "teacher-pupil" and "pupil-pupil" discussion groups	3. Other subject matter specialists
4. Service clubs		4. County agents
5. League of Women Voters		5. County agent supervisors or leaders
6. Home demonstration clubs	4. Circulars and pamphlets on specific subjects distributed by county agent	6. Home demonstration agents
7. Youth groups		7. County leaders who teach small groups such as home demonstration clubs or community farm groups
8. General farm groups	5. Magazines	
9. Urban groups	6. Newspapers	
10. The public in general	7. Bulletins	
	8. Television	
	9. Radio	

particularly in teaching general background information, and with specific individuals, in person-to-person teaching.

3. People who understand policy problems, alternatives, and consequences can use mass media for teaching nonfarm groups and the general public.

Obviously the best possible teaching aids should be used regardless of what combination of the above possibilities is included in a policy education program for a county. While all kinds of visual aids are valuable, some are, of course, more effective in one situation than in another.

The discussion method used at this meeting was designed to allow participants to discuss the different conditions and problems that exist in the various states. Solutions proposed by various groups were based upon the experience and judgment of everyone in the group. Younger men with less experience had an opportunity to discuss their ideas with men of more experience. Answers were not given by the discussion leader because this problem has no one solution any more than any one farm organization best fits all farms.