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Objectives and Philosophy of Public Affairs Education

By C. R. Jaccard

I consider this a dedicated group of men engaged in the never-ending struggle to preserve the precious liberties of American citizenship. Your efforts are directed to keeping the American public ever mindful that to enjoy the blessings of our freedom we must assume the obligations of citizenship—namely, being aware of and participating in the formation of policies pertaining to public affairs.

Since the Federal Extension Service has decided to create a position in public affairs at the national level, it is important to establish a common understanding. For that reason I seek your collective judgment at this time. The leader of this or any collective endeavor must be ever mindful of the inscription found on the walls of an Armenian temple in the ancient city of Aru which said, “the wise remember that the principal one who leads the flock to the pasture field is just an animal like the rest.”

A woodsman was once asked, “What would you do if you had just five minutes to chop down a tree?” He answered, “I would spend the first two and a half minutes sharpening my axe.” Let us take a few minutes to sharpen our perspective.

OBJECTIVES OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION

In 1949 a group of state directors and economists met in Washington, D. C., reviewed the work being done, and adopted the following objectives:

To develop in individuals:

1. An active interest in Public Affairs' problems.
2. An understanding of the issues and principles involved.
3. The ability to make judgments on the basis of a critical examination of the evidence and logical thinking.
4. A desire to participate effectively in the solution of these problems.

This is a broad charter. Public affairs education involves more than just farm policy issues. For example, taxation and schools are current critical issues.

In 1954 the Farm Foundation asked “a group of eminent agricultural economists for an objective formulation of principles and criteria for sound action” with respect to “farm policies and pro-

grams." The purpose of this analysis was not to furnish direction for extension workers in the policy field, but rather to "help in raising questions and stimulating frank and logical analysis and discussion of whatever farm programs may be proposed."

The keynote of their findings was that:

Our farm policy needs to be realistically shaped to the conditions developing for the future rather than to continue as a legacy from the past. We cannot afford to go on indefinitely merely adding patches either to the depression policy of the thirties or the war policies of the forties. The world we live in is dynamic, and farm policy should march with the development of technology, of the market, and of our national aspirations toward economic stability.

Although there may be little or no conflict in these two objectives, the latter is certainly more restricted.

Some of you participated in this first meeting. You have since been engaged in developing the work in your respective states. How far have we gone? Where are we now? Are you satisfied with the present status of public affairs education?

This is presumably an educational effort. Education promotes change:

1. Change in knowledge—things known.
2. Change in skills—things done.
3. Change in attitudes—things felt.

Is there a measurable objective in public affairs education? Can we measure changes in knowledge or attitudes, the principal areas in which we work? Dare we assume that we have produced changes that have resulted in action? How much respect do we show our own efforts in our annual reports? In our plans of work? Do extension directors really feel that this field is important?

The records show inclusion of public affairs in 20 state plans of work. Public affairs education is recognized in 41 percent of the state directors' reports. Definite responsibility has been assigned in 43 states. In 1955 annual reports 20 man years were credited to this activity. Public affairs education is now apparently ready to assume an important position in the extension family.

You who have opened the road should be able to set up the markers to make the road easier to travel for those who succeed you. This we are asking you to do in the spirit of this poem:

A curve in the road and a hillside
And a soft cloud hanging high
A tall tree tossed by the wintry winds
Clear cut against the sky.

Ten men passed along that road
And all but one passed by.
He saw the tree and the hill and the cloud
With an artist's mind and eye
And put them down on canvas
For the other nine to buy.

In order to use your experience in setting up guideposts for new workers and for your own advancement, we would like your combined opinions on several questions.

At this point the participants were divided into small groups and assigned questions for discussion. Their findings were as follows.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Objectives

QUESTION: Should we be opportunists and try to promote “understanding” of current economic and social issues or should we be fundamentalists and confine ourselves to “principles and logic” of national agricultural legislation?

DISCUSSION: This is not a question of one or the other. Our public affairs considerations go beyond strictly farm policy issues and include such important problems as the functional needs of rural communities. Group educational processes and objectives should enhance the ability of the individual to think clearly and to make intelligent decisions on public issues.

We must start with people as they are and use current economic and social issues as a means for arousing their interest and getting their attention. This may be referred to as the opportunist approach. But due caution needs be taken to analyze and to inform people of the longer-range implications to make sure that decisions with respect to short-term issues do not conflict with longer-range objectives and ends.

Over a period of time the extension worker's responsibility is to help provide the analysis and information on which important decisions are to be based. We will take advantage of current issues and provide people with the facts, but in doing so we will “teach” fundamentals — with the objective of raising the level of economic consciousness. Aid is required to help people recognize any public problem. We have an obligation in both areas.

QUESTION: Is our function only to discuss issues before they become laws?

DISCUSSION: By definition policy involves group decisions. These decisions result in laws. If no change in existing law or regulations

requiring group decision is at issue, no policy education is implied. The job then becomes dissemination of information. To the extent that many policies are not “finished” or settled issues, continuing education and analysis is needed to keep improving and developing. Also, a new law or issue may create need for information.

QUESTION: To what extent and in what way should we pursue an issue such as “underemployed farmers,” “the cotton problem,” or “the Plains program”?

DISCUSSION: Such discussion has no limits except from the standpoint of resources available. If no concern for a particular public problem is shown by specialized interests or the public, we should continue to have the opportunity to help leaders and people to look more carefully at the problem.

If the problem is to encourage group effort to activate a program already adopted or to obtain new legislation to solve important problems, this is a policy issue for which we have a responsibility.

While the primary job is to help make sound decisions, public affairs specialists can also assist in setting up organizations for effective implementation of these decisions. The actual implementation should be done by farm organizations, local commissions, or committees with the specialist assisting in an advisory capacity.

QUESTION: What benchmarks can we establish for evaluation of our work?

DISCUSSION: Knowledge of facts about public issues can be measured. The resources available have limited the dissemination of facts and likely will be a deterrent for some time. We do not consider the number of man-hours, meetings, or reports of much significance. Requests for assistance provide some measure of active interest.

The number of persons showing interest in the program, including the number of persons attending meetings and the intensity of their interest, may be considered an indicator. Interest and participation in public affairs over an extended period of time is significant. To measure this properly, quality as well as quantity would need to be considered.

Relation to the State Staff

QUESTION: Is it important to encourage the rest of the state extension staff to consider public issues?

DISCUSSION: Other staff members must be encouraged to consider policy issues. First, they are all involved as citizens, and second, as

specialists they serve as resource people in specific subject matter areas. Our obligation is to interest them in the issue, to inform them of what we are trying to do, and to help them understand its importance and its relation to their work.

Teamwork is required wherever their subject matter is involved. It is important to create the feeling that work with other state staff members is a two-way proposition. In some cases this might be done by creating an advisory committee of staff members regarding subject matter. Specialists need to discuss issues to avoid misunderstandings as well as to become better informed on matters of economic significance. Discussion of issues with the staff as a group also encourages teamwork at the county level in dealing with policy.

QUESTION: Should we avoid discussion of certain issues?

DISCUSSION: We will discuss any and all issues unless local conditions indicate that we can make no contribution. We will be governed by time, place, audience, competence of individuals, information available, and discretion.

We may provide facts on controversial issues to help people make their own policy decisions, but we will not offer opinions. Whenever possible, discussion should precede policy decisions. The economic implications of any real issue may be discussed.

QUESTION: Where do we draw the line between informed opinion and action?

DISCUSSION: We make no attempt to resolve "right" and "wrong." Since the goal is enlightened public action, the extension worker's job is always improving opinion.

Included in our responsibility in public affairs education is an explanation of alternative means of achieving action. We should have a continuing program of providing general economic information. For public affairs education, we need to start as soon as a problem becomes apparent and continue education until a decision is made.

QUESTION: What is our obligation to other specialists with respect to public affairs information relating to their areas of responsibility?

DISCUSSION: We have not only an obligation but an opportunity to get appropriate material to other specialists. Also working as a team often affords opportunities for better understanding of subject matter and enables listening specialists to learn what importance the public attaches to the policy issue under consideration.

Servicing County Agents

QUESTION: If we are to spread our influence beyond our personal capabilities, what aids must we give county workers to help them assume responsibilities in the field of public affairs?

DISCUSSION: State leaders in public affairs education should conduct in-service training for the entire county staff. This can be done by holding district training schools and providing assistance at county meetings. Methods as well as subject matter must be taught.

We should encourage county agents to take advantage of summer school scholarships for this training and stimulate them to apply what they have learned following the course. It is our responsibility to furnish agents with subject matter relating to the issues being considered.

Farm organization leaders and other groups may help direct the agents' interest by channeling their requests through the county office.

QUESTION: What can we contribute to program projection?

DISCUSSION: We should serve as resource persons on program projection in helping to evaluate problems and issues in the county and helping to determine which should be included in the current work.

Servicing Other Groups

QUESTION: How can we best serve other groups who, in a democratic society, have the final responsibility for deciding what local or national policies should be recommended?

DISCUSSION: The problem of servicing interested groups involves many variables. Because of the newness of this field of extension endeavor, some initiative is required on the part of the state leaders. When their availability as resource persons becomes known, the problem is allocation of time.

To be able to function properly in any situation, the policy problem must be identified. Alternative solutions or actions must then be outlined and analyzed. After that facts must be assembled to provide a basis for intelligent consideration by the public.

The subject matter or the manner of presentation will vary with different groups. We might divide the groups into a few general classes, such as radio listeners, TV viewers, and the reading public. Material for such groups is generally designed to arouse interest. Laborious detailed explanations are inappropriate. Commercial

groups will have varying interest, ranging from none to intense interest in personal economic welfare. Organized farm groups are generally contacted most frequently, and they are interested in thoroughly understanding the issue. Many of the organized women's groups will also pursue a subject with intensity.

Because of the variety of groups, the intensity of interest, reasons for concern, and the circumstances under which the subject is to be presented, methods will vary. Our function in working with groups is to analyze and present the proposals and alternatives in such a manner that the participants will be stimulated to consider the facts and arrive at informed conclusions based on their own set of values.

PART II

*Agricultural Policy in
a Changing Economy*

