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How the Land-Grant College Can Be More Effective in Farmers' Understanding of Public Policy

By Lauren Soth

The land-grant colleges have been doing a much better job of education in public policy in recent years. I do not claim to know how to do the job any better than you do yourselves, but maybe an outsider can provide encouragement and help reinforce your own ideas. I will present my comments in the form of four points.

First, and in my opinion most important, don't avoid controversy; take advantage of it. Opinion researchers have found a high degree of correlation between knowledge about any subject and interest in it. When public interest is high, when controversy is alive, that seems to be the most favorable climate for getting across information.

It is hard for those of us concerned with public affairs to realize that many people just have no interest in such things. Opinion researchers have found that there exists in our population a sizable bloc of chronic "know-nothings." Surveys consistently find a certain proportion of the public which is not familiar with any particular event or idea. Each time our research department conducts a poll, it finds a large number of people who have no opinion, or who do not understand a question, about farm price supports. It may seem surprising for an Iowa audience, but about one-third of those interviewed in a recent survey had no opinion about the so-called Brannan Plan for direct payments in lieu of price supports.

Of course, people who have inadequate information and who know nothing about public issues still make political decisions about farm programs, about international trade policy, and so on.

In order to raise the level of public understanding and to reduce the size of the bloc of "know-nothings," the educator must take every advantage he can of controversy. Sometimes educators shy away from issues which are suffused with a heated political atmosphere. This is a mistake in my judgment and a failure to seize the best opportunity for education in public affairs.

In the last several months, I am convinced, the public learned much more about the fundamentals of the American system of government, the Constitutional separation of powers, and the whole theory of a free society, largely because of the McCarthy controversy. Our

public opinion polls, as well as those taken nationally by Gallup and others, indicate that this is true. Educators in citizenship and government have had a rich field for exploitation. They have had a ready audience.

My second point is that the educator should not be afraid to take an individual position, that is, to state his own views positively. I do not mean that a teacher should take a stand just for the sake of taking one. But if he has positive ideas, if he has come to a conclusion in his own thinking, then he should not be shy about revealing his view to the people he is trying to educate. Professors often assume a phony air of objectivity and impartiality which detracts from their ability to get across information.

An educator should not wade into political fights, *as an educator*, of course. He should not get into personalities, partisan politics, or extremism. He should keep his "pitch" at a high scholarly level. At the same time, he should admit that he has an opinion and state clearly what it is.

I often think that a newspaper editorial which takes a clear-cut position gets across more information to people who disagree with it than to those who agree with it. In fact, I encourage our writers to write directly to the people on the other side of the question. Those who already agree with us will not be critical of what we say anyway. It is those on the other side whom we can possibly enlighten with new information and new ideas. An effective editorial should not be aimed primarily at persuading someone to change his point of view, but primarily at getting across information. And I think an educator's job is similar.

I do not mean that an educational institution, as such, should take a position on public questions — except in rare instances, perhaps. Its function is to provide the facilities for individual teachers to operate in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. In other words, the college should not express an institutional viewpoint but should encourage its staff members to speak and write freely.

I am convinced that there is real educational value in writing vigorously about a point of view. I think economists, sociologists, and political scientists can get across more understanding of the issues when they argue an opinion than they can when they attempt to be coolly objective. Objectivity is fine, but unfortunately it sometimes seems insipid.

My third point is that an educator should present alternatives on all questions of public policy and try to describe the consequences

of different choices. This, after all, is his principal job. In what I have said about taking a position and taking advantage of controversy, I certainly would not want to leave the impression that I think heat is more important than light. I am only suggesting that you take advantage of heat to throw out more light.

Even in stating a point of view vigorously, the educator, if he is true to his profession, will admit frankly that he might be wrong. He will concede that reasonable men could hold other opinions and that there is something to be said on the other side. Moreover, he will attempt to explain what the other points of view are, as an aid to understanding. He will not forget that his main job is to inform, to explain, to interpret. In short, he will emphasize the facts and information that bear on the public policy question involved, rather than his own viewpoint.

My fourth point has to do with competence, a scholarly attitude, and skill in the art of public education. Sometimes college administrations can hardly be blamed when they clamp down on individual professors in their off-campus educational work. In all these matters, reason and balance must be uppermost, and incompetent educators in the field of public affairs can soon destroy an institution's usefulness in this field just by doing a poor job.

But incompetence has not been the major block to better education in public policy by the land-grant colleges. The major block has been fear of getting involved in controversy. I believe the land-grant colleges of the Middle West, for example, have failed to do an adequate job of public education in the field of public policy related to dairying. I might include the whole fats and oils business. To be blunt, the colleges have been prisoners of the dairy industry pressure groups. They have been afraid to say what they know is right about nutritional values of butter in relation to margarine, about other animal fats in relation to vegetable oil substitutes. They have been afraid to explain to farmers what trends in production and consumption of fats and oils would mean to them and what sweeping adjustments are needed in manufacturing and marketing of dairy products.

To a certain extent, also, education in the field of public policy on soil conservation has been hampered by similar fears. College administrators have often decided that they had plenty of other work to do, so they might as well leave the hot questions alone. As I have indicated before, I do not believe this is good tactics in public education, and it certainly is not a responsible attitude to take.

Fortunately, I think this period is passing now, and most of the Midwestern colleges are taking hold of this subject with vigor.

An institution's reputation for honesty, fairness, and high standards of education is its most valuable possession. It should not jeopardize its reputation by unwise partisanship in controversies, nor should individual staff members jeopardize their reputation for objectivity by such action. On the other hand, avoiding a hot controversy and "standing aside" also jeopardizes the reputation of an institution or of an individual faculty member. Besides, refusing to do the job of education on a question of public importance is not living up to the responsibilities of the educational profession.

Colleges have a responsibility to select well-qualified staff members in public affairs education — as in all other positions. Then they have the responsibility of holding these staff members to scholarly methods and attitudes. Beyond that, they have a responsibility to let their staff members speak out freely. All these requirements must be met for a good job of public policy education.