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Title: Ag Policy Education: Is The Profession Meeting the Needs of Its Clientele?

Organized Symposium 1979 AAEA Meeting

Topic: Policy for Extension Clientele: What Are We Teaching; Is it useful?

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Within the land-grant system, the mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is education outside the formal classroom. This places a major responsibility for the planning and conducting of public policy education programs on Extension, even though these programs deal with politically sensitive issues.

A 1948 joint committee report on Extension programs, policies and goals pointed out that the land-grant universities have a moral obligation to conduct meaningful, effective programs in the area of public policy and merely disseminating facts about conditions at a particular time is not sufficient. The objective of such programs was stated as "...The development of people themselves to the end that they, through their own initiative, may effectively identify and solve the various problems directly affecting their welfare."

The scope report of 1958 said "...It should be crystal clear that Extension's function is not policy determination. Rather its function is to better equip the people it serves through educational processes to analyze issues involved on the basis of all available facts. It is the prerogative and responsibility of people themselves, individually or collectively, to make their own decisions on policy issues and express them as they see fit."

It is becoming more and more difficult to identify any Extension program which does not have a public policy dimension. Where many agents and specialists have been able to meet their clientele and present them with prescriptions, this is becoming less and less appropriate as questions are raised concerning first and second level impacts on human health, safety, and welfare, or on general environmental quality. This has stimulated a great deal of interest for training in public policy methodology for Extension personnel.

The basic methodology followed by virtually all public policy educators simply involves: (1) selecting and clearly defining an issue; (2) listing the goals, values, and objectives which society wishes to attain in solving the problem; (3) developing a wide range of alternative solutions designed to solve the problem; (4) exploring the consequences and impacts of each of the alternatives together with determining the distribution of the related costs and benefits across the population; then, (5) leaving the policy decision to the people.

Several training models are presently being used in Extension, three of which are described below. The first model is exemplified by the public policy course taught in the Extension Winter School at the University of Arizona. This course has had the longest run of any of our present policy training activities. It is designed to teach Extension agents and Extension specialists, who are not regularly involved in public policy education, the basic elements of public policy methodology and the content of public policy education programs. The students are familiarized

with criteria for determining the feasibility of involvement in particular public policy issues. The basic educational philosophy underlying this type of program is discussed. The general role of the public policy specialist is defined and the students are then helped in understanding basic public policy education methodology.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the methodology is problem definition. Attempts are made to help the student learn to distinguish between symptoms and basic problems. Identifying alternative solutions to basic public policy questions is then undertaken. This is followed by an analysis of the consequences of the various alternatives together with the distribution of these consequences across the society. The students are then helped in identifying appropriate audiences and educational strategies for successful public policy education programs.

This training is reinforced by the use of case studies examining each methodological element. These cases are varied and deal with topics with which all segments of the Extension Service can easily identify. The students are expected to develop a policy element for their plans of work involving an issue which is important in their particular locale. They are encouraged to make this more than just an academic exercise by actually executing the plan of work element when they return to their home locations.

Feedbacks on this particular training model have been very positive throughout the years. While such training could be undertaken within a given State, one of the very positive

advantages of the present structure is the interaction that takes place among agents from different States and different situations.

The second training model discussed here is the PACE project (Public Affairs Community Education) conducted by the Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University. The immediate objective of this project was to: (1) determine and provide appropriate educational experience for Extension agents to improve their capacity to add a public affairs dimension to their programs; (2) to identify and develop educational material useful to agents in educational programming in this area; and (3) evaluate the acceptability of Extension agents in various types of public affairs and community development educational activities. The target audience was county Extension staff working with families in the community. The program was worked with a selected group of 40 Extension agents over a 2½-year period. It included inservice training, program planning, development of Extension materials, experimental agent programs, and evaluation. A one-half time Extension specialist was hired to coordinate this educational program.

The training program included 8, 2-day workshops over 2½ years together with assorted field responsibilities. A one-week visit to Washington, D.C., was scheduled as the fourth workshop session integrating this experience into the full flow of the staff development process.

Agents were elected into a planning group which rotated throughout the teaching period. This group assessed participant needs and growth, considered their colleagues' specific comments

and suggestions and was largely responsible for deciding the main theme, objectives of individual workshops and the general format. In addition, case studies were frequently used as well as other guided discussion sessions. This provided the opportunity for participants to internalize materials being presented.

Task forces were formed among the participants and were responsible for assignments ranging from preparing reports for distribution to colleagues on pending legislation, to preparing a 30-minute program dealing with a food safety and nutrition policy issues. Others developed sample one-year public affairs community development programming plans of work. Subgroups also worked on the development of educational program resource units. The project leader and project coordinator were available and open to discuss the projects themselves whenever a felt need developed.

Preliminary evaluation of this project indicates that it resulted in increased confidence, increased ability, increased understanding of the public policy decisionmaking processes, an increased understanding of the role and necessity of citizen participation, increased knowledge of written and human resources for public policy educational programming, a new perspective on Extension's relationship to other governmental agencies in the budget process, a new perspective on Extension's role and value in public policy education, and broadened understanding of policy impact of traditional program areas.

The third model was developed by the Policy Education Project sponsored by the Western Public Policy Education Committee. This project proposed to train Extension field staff in public policy education. An advisory committee was formed and a project director selected. Key decisions which affected the project were that the philosophy and methods would be taught by case example and an issue common to all States, land use, was chosen as a vehicle to make policy education methods more tangible. The work shop was for 10 days and 50 Extension field staff took advantage of this unique opportunity. Policy specialists from the six states were present to share in the training and assist the participants in their activities.

The program had 3 parts: (1) philosophy and methods of policy education; (2) technical information about land use; and (3) planning post-workshop educational activities on whatever issue the participants selected.

The workshop was conducted on an informal presentation, question and answer, discussion basis with continuous feedback from the participating agents. In addition assignments were made to be carried out by the agents either individually or by groups. Case examples were presented which had actually been conducted by agents in the field. This helped the class identify with efforts in the public policy arena. Each participant was required to develop a plan of work element and was charged with executing this element in the field during the year following the training.

At the end of the program year a followup session was held where the 50 participants were again brought together. Additional training, identified prior to the session by the participating agents, was covered together with a maximum opportunity for feedback from the agents relative to their public policy experience. A newsletter was developed after the original training and continued for the next 2 years, reporting back to the participants and the staff the activities being undertaken by the agents involved in the training.

Observers from all four regions' public policy and CRD committees were brought in to observe the followup meeting at the end of the program year to enable them to gain an understanding of what had been done and to evaluate the results as observed at the meeting. Feedback from these observers has led to training efforts in the Northeastern Region, the Southern Region, and the Southwestern Region of the United States.

While each of the models discussed above have had individual differences, the common theme throughout has been the teaching of basic public policy education methodology to improve agents' capacity to add a public policy element to their programs. Experience have shown that those agents who understand this methodology not only have been successful in handling public policy education programs on topics that were at least potentially controversial, but have gained a tremendous personal reinforcement from doing so. Further support from the various levels of administration has been forthcoming as it has been demonstrated that the agents can indeed gain competence and the confidence of their clientele groups in public policy education efforts.

The most successful training efforts have all involved the participating Extension agents in the planning process and have encompassed a continual feedback mechanism. Formal evaluation has been part of the process with continuity beyond the training itself. Supervised help in the preparation and execution of a plan of work element on a policy issue together with reinforcement following the field experience has been a characteristic. Finally the public policy education training has been conducted through the issues with a mixture of methodology and technical inputs.

We have learned that it does not take 20 years of Extension experience for a person to be able to conduct useful public policy education programs. Appropriate training can be provided and observed by agents in the field on public policy methodology that enables them to effectively carry out educational programs on controversial issues and continue to retain their position in their local communities.

Agents who have received adequate training have found their efforts to be very satisfying and personally rewarding. Understanding and being able to apply the methodology, retaining impartiality (objectivity), dealing only with the best available scientific information and insisting that the decision be made by the publics concerned (i.e. believing in the democratic process) is essential. Under these circumstances, agents find that their clientele gain respect for their ability to educate on public issues. Agents, in turn, get "turned on" by finding they can help solve controversial or potentially controversial community problems, without becoming advocates for any particular solution.

The increasing awareness that physical and biological phenomena impact economic and social concerns leaves less and less opportunity for "prescriptive" extension programs. Rather, examination of possible alternatives are being demanded. This leads to a need for training, such as that discussed here, for virtually all Extension agents and specialists. Administrative support for this training is necessary and is emerging as evidenced by sessions presently scheduled in the Northeastern and Southern regions, supported by their Rural Development Centers. These efforts are expected to result in more CES supported activity. The time is right for improving Extension's competency in public policy education.