

A BROADER ROLE FOR AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS

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One of the most talked-about topics today is the broadening function of high school programs on instruction in agriculture -- going beyond the traditional program of vocational education in agriculture oriented toward establishment in farming. When we attend professional conferences or read journals reaching the profession, we come into contact with a steady flow of ideas about the broadening role of agricultural education in the public schools.

But very little has been said about the future of teacher education in agriculture, both in relation to the aforementioned developments and in the broader context.

To attempt to see over the horizon is admittedly speculation, but at the same time there are enough signs of what may be in the offing for agricultural teacher education departments to justify some speculation.

Historically, college departments of agricultural education have hewn to a rather narrow role -- providing professional training for persons preparing specifically to become high school teachers of vocational agriculture. In fact, this has been limited even further to preparation largely for teaching in programs of federally-aided vocational agriculture. If graduates entered some other kind of agricultural education, it was assumed that their preparation for teaching in federally-aided vocational agriculture would serve them well.

There seems to be growing among agricultural teacher educators and among administrators in land-grant colleges of agriculture, the feeling that departments of agricultural education can serve a broader role in preparing people for work which is educational in nature and which involves the subject matter of agriculture or a clientele which is engaged in occupations in or related to agriculture.

The first manifestation of this is the combining with existing agricultural education departments the job of providing professional training for agricultural extension service workers (which has occurred in nine institutions). Some may see this as a simple merger. Others, however, see this as only a first step in a greatly broadened role for agricultural education departments.

Precisely what is this role? No one can predict accurately, but there appears to be reason to believe that in the future -- perhaps near future -- agricultural education departments will be called upon to provide instruction in education and human relations for agricultural college graduates who will enter a wide range of

occupations. Some will point out that for many years persons preparing for theology schools and the rural ministry, for agricultural missionary work, as governmental agricultural field workers and other occupations, have majored or taken courses in agricultural education. However, most of us would probably admit that work with these people has been only a sideline, and that little effort had been made to determine what training should be provided for them.

Increasing percentages of agricultural college graduates are entering agricultural occupations which require considerable understanding of people and the educational process. This includes field representatives for a multitude of agricultural businesses and industry, managers of farmer cooperatives and businesses related thereto, agricultural credit and financing, agricultural journalism, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, advertising, and public relations, foreign agricultural service, including FAS per se plus "point-four" work (AID), and work with a wide variety of other organizations abroad.

As one examines these occupations, he soon realizes that through all of them there runs a common vein -- the need for trained professional workers who understand people, who can communicate ideas, who understand the educational process.

Leaders in colleges of agriculture are already questioning the desirability of training in a single agricultural discipline for people who will enter such work. They feel that such training should be supplemented with preparation in what might be called the "people business." When one analyzes this need and then looks for people to provide such training in a land-grant college, he is likely to conclude that the agricultural teacher education department is the most logical group to provide most of the training and leadership.

What are the implications of this for agricultural education departments? First, it may mean that teacher educators will be called upon to develop complete curricula to prepare persons for this broad range of responsibilities. Several different curricula may be involved, but it is more likely that a single basic curriculum will be developed with electives or several options to permit students and advisors to plan programs of study that will best suit them for their particular interests and occupational goals.

Second, it will very likely mean that agricultural teacher educators will be called upon to provide service courses; that is, courses in education, human relations, and related topics for students majoring in the various curriculums in agriculture. Traditionally, teacher educators have taught only teacher education majors, with occasional exceptions. This has permitted, and led to, a high degree of specificity in our teaching, with orientation toward a specific kind of occupational activity. Some leaders feel that this has led to excessive attention to specific techniques for a single occupational activity at the expense of developing basic understandings of principles that are fundamental to competence in that and other occupational endeavors.

The teaching of service courses would be a new experience for many teacher educators which would require changes in approach and attitude toward the subject taught and the students. No longer would he be able to tie all of the teaching to a single occupation, but would find it necessary to teach principles and practices that would be used in a wide variety of occupations. This might be frustrating to some teacher educators, but in the long run it would probably be a valuable experience for the teacher educator, and would, to some degree, be likely to improve the quality of teaching in agricultural teacher education courses.

If these speculations become reality, the changes will not be without trauma. While advocating change, in principle, most of us change with difficulty. Our established patterns of thought and action would have to be reorientated, our nostalgias would be debased, and our academic competencies would need to be refurbished. And, yet, when viewed in perspective, these possibilities cannot but titillate the imagination of agricultural teacher educators who are excited by the surges of change that surround us.