

## **Supervised Occupational Experience Programs: History, Philosophy, Current Status, and Future Implications**

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The use of supervised occupational experience (SOE) programs in vocational agriculture has declined since the passage of the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (Moore, 1979). SOE programs were originally developed as a means of offering practical experience in production agriculture. Considering the decreased emphasis of production agriculture, are today's SOE programs relevant? What purpose have SOE programs had in the past and what role will they play in the future? Before answering the questions presented, one needs to review the development of SOE programs and the philosophy supporting their acceptance.

### **Purposes and Objectives**

The purposes of this research were to examine the evolution of SOE programs in agricultural education, provide an overview of their current status, and suggest the direction they will take in the future.

Specific objectives were:

1. To identify individuals instrumental in developing SOE programs as an integral part of the vocational agriculture curriculum.
2. To identify events in the history of the development of vocational agriculture that led to the adoption of SOE programs.
3. To identify the current status of SOE programs.
4. To identify the future direction of SOE through an analysis of past philosophy and current status.

### **Methods and Procedures**

The researchers collected pertinent materials from a wide variety of sources. Computerized literature searches of educational databases were conducted. Older publications were found by a hand search. Publications examined were: (a) The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture; (b) early textbooks in education; (c) textbooks in agricultural education; (d) The Agricultural Education Magazine; (e) agricultural education theses and dissertations; and (f) papers presented at the National SOE Workshop.

Thirty different source materials were used to address the objectives in this study. After careful organization of the information, results were determined, conclusions were formulated, and implications were drawn.

### **Results**

#### **Early History and Philosophy**

Researchers (Moore, 1979; Stimson, 1942) have traced the roots of supervised occupational experience programs to the late 19th and early

20th centuries. Names of SOE programs have changed over the span of time, but the theory behind the concept has essentially remained the same.

At the turn of the 20th century, 80% of students dropped out of school before reaching high school. The dropout rate soared to 97% before high school graduation. School programs were described as impractical and boring. In 1908, Sam Gompers, American Federation of Labor President, appointed a commission to study the educational situation. The commission recommended education for all young people and the opportunity to learn many technical skills (Herren, 1986).

The National Grange was supportive of education in the areas of practical agriculture, domestic science, and all the arts that adorn the home. In 1907, the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE) studied the possibilities of bringing together the forces of labor, industry, and agriculture (Herren, 1986).

Before 1908 the need for agricultural education below the college level was apparent in all states. An early trend in fulfilling this need was the establishment of dormitory schools. Early dormitory schools were costly to establish and maintain as they attempted to emulate the land-grant colleges of their time. The schools enrolled too many students and provided a limited amount and variety of farm activities. The students were dissatisfied with the lack of practical educational experiences. Stimson (1942, p. 584) stated, "The 50-man farm was a rarity. The 50-boy school or college was not." The principle of hands-on experience was not satisfactorily used in this environment.

In 1908, as a result of the Douglas Commission report, Massachusetts provided funding for the Smith's Agricultural School at Northampton, Massachusetts. The trustees purchased a farm and put it into operation. Rufus Stimson was hired as the director of the school and operator of the farm. Stimson had traveled and viewed various other schools of agriculture in the country, including the School of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota. He had studied the problems associated with the dormitory schools that were common at the time. As director, Rufus Stimson convinced the trustees to allow him to sell the cows, operate the school without a dormitory, and cease using school property for farming purposes. According to Stimson, the students arriving each day were concerned with problems they faced on their own home farms. He did not want the students returning home contemplating farming problems they had encountered during school hours. He wanted their attention to be focused sharply on home farming problems and their solutions, based on well-studied programs of work and management (Stimson, 1942). The results of this school were the basis of the "home-project" concept of vocational agriculture, the supervised occupational experience (SOE) program of today.

At this early stage of home-projects, the aspect of record keeping was introduced. If a home-project entailed helping with the milking of the cows, the students was required to keep records on production, feed, and milk testing during certain months of the year. Each student was required to keep records even if the farmer had failed to undertake this task in the past.

Farm projects were well received by the parents. They liked the idea of the student not being sent to a boarding school. This approach to agricultural education kept the student at home where he could participate in the farm operation and eliminated the expense of boarding school.

Farm projects appealed to the youth. The success of their projects and the opportunity to compete with adults in local fairs and shows motivated students to achieve. Noting student motivation, Mr. Stimson viewed the new experience as one where the students, and not the instructor, asked most of the questions (Stimson, 1919).

The professional community welcomed the idea of farm-projects. W. W. Charters, Dean of Education at the University of Missouri, visited Stimson and observed his project method in 1915. Charters, a disciple and student of John Dewey, commented that the project method was an excellent example of problem solving (Moore, 1985).

#### Factors Influencing Stimson's Development of SOE Program Concept

The works of Socrates, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Herbart occupied a prominent place on Stimson's desk (Stimson, 1942). In addition, Rufus Stimson had studied under William James at Harvard. James' philosophy was summed up in the following:

The most colossal improvement in secondary education lies in the introduction of manual training schools; not because they will give us a people more handy and practical for domestic life and better skilled in trades, but because they will give us citizens of an entirely different intellectual fiber. (p. 592).

One of the major influences on Stimson was Herbert Spencer. Spencer's writings placed a high emphasis on vocational education. Spencer insisted that vocational education provide vocational knowledge for the average student in the average college, and offer no less for the average pupil in the average school.

Senator Justin S. Morrill's idea to furnish a "liberal and practical education" also influenced Stimson. Morrill, the author of the 1862 Morrill Act, encouraged an education that would equip young men and women for life (Stimson, 1942). In 1886, John Dewey introduced "project or problem" methods into the experimental school at the University of Chicago. This concept had an influence on the development of Stimson's home-project concept of teaching agriculture.

At the time Stimson was including the concept of home projects in the Northampton School, two other people, David Snedden, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education from 1909-1919, and Charles A. Prosser, Deputy Commissioner of Education in charge of Vocational Education, were also making an impact upon vocational education and vocational agriculture. Snedden was an advocate of the home project concept in agriculture. He felt that every student should be expected to participate for a part of a day, week, month, or year in the actual productive work of the home or school farm. His philosophy was summed up in the following (Stimson, 1942):

At the end of a dormitory school course, a boy goes forth empty handed to make his start in life. Under the home project plan . . . a boy at the end of his course not only has had four years of thorough training, but he may have accomplished four years of farm development and may have very tangible results to show for his efforts. (p. 192)

Prosser felt successful vocational education required the combining of two elements, practice and theory. Greater intimacy between the two increased the school's contribution to the learner's immediate success. On June 7, 1913, Mr. Prosser, secretary of the newly formed

NSPIE, invited representatives of state departments of education in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey to a conference at Staten Island, New York. Rufus Stimson was invited to explain the principles and practices underlying the Northampton School. The representatives attending the Staten Island conference played a prominent role in the vocational education program established under the Smith-Hughes Act.

Supervised occupational experience programs have changed since the concept was developed by Stimson. Terminology used in agricultural education literature and the proficiency awards offered by the FFA have reflected these changes. The terms "supervised farming practice" or "farming practice" dominated the scene until 1963. The Vocational Education Act of 1963 guided educators to include non-farm agricultural occupations in their curricula. This legislative act, coupled with the realization that most students would not return to the farm, initiated the addition of "and occupational experience" to the previously mentioned terms. Terminology frequently changed during the '60s. In 1967, "supervised occupational experience" was selected as the appropriate term and is still used today. More than SOE terminology has changed as the current literature reveals.

#### Current Status

Literature has affirmed the declining importance of SOE programs in secondary level vocational agriculture since passage of the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (Moore, 1979). The 1963 Act stated:

Any amounts allotted (or apportioned) under such titles, Act, or Acts for agriculture may be used for vocational education in any occupation involving knowledge and skills in agricultural subjects, whether or not such occupation involves work of the farm or of the farm home; and such education may be provided without directed or supervised practice on a farm. (p. 219)

This wording was meant to open the door for off-farm SOE programs, not eliminate them. However, research has shown SOE participation has been inconsistent from state to state.

#### SOE Participation

Forty percent of the students in the Southern Region lacked a SOE program each year they were enrolled (Iverson, 1980). One-fourth of the vocational agriculture programs in New York failed to have a written SOE program plan for students; half of the vocational agriculture programs included freshman students with SOE programs, and of the students involved with placement, only 27.5% had accumulated more than 300 hours of experience (Berkey & Sutphin, 1983). In Florida (Arrington & Price, 1983), 68% of the agricultural students had undertaken an SOE program for one year out of four, but only 42% had contracted one for four years. Twenty-four percent of the students had been involved in placement programs. In Areas I & II in Texas, Harris (1983) found 58% of the departments reported 100% of the students with SOE programs. Harris also found low instructor commitment and emphasis resulted in low quality SOE programs and a lack of consistency in SOE participation.

Excessive paperwork, excessive number of students, and students without farm backgrounds discouraged instructors in West Virginia from implementing SOE programs according to Miozi (cited in Lee, 1985). Witt (cited in Lee, 1985) noted disagreement between instructors and school administrators in North Dakota on summer program activities. Miller (1980), reporting on a North Carolina study, concluded that 42% of the

teachers did not "regularly" visit students and expected only 58% of their students to have SOE programs. The New York study (Berkey & Sutphin, 1983) reported that 25% of the teachers did not make SOE program visits, only 55% of the students received one visit, 26% more than one visit, and that 41% of the teachers did not consider SOE programs when determining course grades. Reviewing summer visitations, Berkey and Sutphin found approximately 19% of the students had one visit, 30% more than one, and 30% received no summer visits. Arrington and Price (1983) found that one-third of the seniors they studied in Florida did not have an SOE program visit during their senior year. Eighty percent of these seniors reported they maintained record books and 75% worked on their record books in class. Morton's study (cited in Newcomb, 1978) also examined the relationship between the number of instructor program visits and the quality of a student's SOE program. Thirty percent of programs classified as "highest quality" received four or more visits per year. Only 16% of the "lowest quality" SOE programs received four or more instructor visits per year. Forty percent of the lowest quality programs received one visit or none at all. Although these studies have painted a fairly negative picture of the current status of SOE, the program has survived.

A recent study by Mick (cited in Case, 1984) found significant relationships between SOE programs and one-year and five-year job placement. To determine the level of involvement of the students in SOE programs, a measure of type, growth, scope, and net income was developed. A comparison of these factors was studied to determine their relationship to one-year and five-year placements. The study concluded that SOE programs significantly increased the placement of students in agriculturally-related occupations; graduates with weaker SOE programs frequently transferred from other jobs to agricultural occupations before or during the fifth year of job placement; and high school programs of vocational agriculture prepared students with farm backgrounds and ownership types of SOE programs for employment in agriculture occupations, neglecting a need to provide instruction about career opportunities in other areas of agriculture.

Memon (cited in Lee, 1985) found that students, employers, and faculty in Iowa considered SOE programs highly important in preparing students for post secondary education. Scores on achievement tests and cumulative grade point averages were shown to improve by Morton (cited in Newcomb, 1978) as the quality of SOE programs increased. Successful SOE programs were associated with informing the administration of FFA and departmental activities (McMillion & Auville, 1976). The concept of real-life situations received the highest rating in a study by Leising (1976). Agricultural education became more relevant with the inclusion of SOE programs.

Williams (1984) identified five ways teachers provided assistance to students in supervised occupational experience programs. Teachers (a) assisted in record keeping for SOE programs; (b) provided encouragement for SOE programs; (c) summarized SOE program records; (d) taught skills in agriculture; and (e) set educational goals in agriculture.

#### Future Implications

History has revealed the importance of determining educational needs before developing ways to accommodate those needs. The current research seems to indicate that these needs are not being adequately met. In the future, the majority of students enrolled in vocational agriculture will have limited farming backgrounds, and agriculture will continue to be more technical, specialized, business oriented, and efficient. Part-time farmers tending 1- to 20-acre farms will continue as a

part of the future. The consuming public will continue to have a limited knowledge base of agriculture as ties to rural life become more distant (McCracken, 1984). This scenario paints a different picture of student needs than those encountered by Stimson when he developed the SOE concept. Educators need to anticipate the challenges the future will bring and adapt SOE programs that will meet those challenges. The SOE program will be strengthened in the process.

The future necessitates emphasizing the work or placement experience and home improvement SOE programs as alternatives to production-oriented programs and the utilization of school farms and labs as teaching tools. These tools will provide ample agriculture experience and an enrollment incentive for many non-farm students. Current graduation requirements have made it difficult for students to enroll in vocational agriculture for their entire four-year high school tenure. To accommodate this situation, flexibility in vocational education's scheduling process is recommended.

Promoting and publicizing the significance of SOE, especially non-production programs and the problem-solving approach it uses, to community leaders and school administrators will assist in educating these individuals of SOE's importance. There is a need to qualify specific vocational education courses for science credits, as graduation requirements in this area increase. Utilizing parents, students, and instructor in all phases of the SOE planning, development, and implementation will inspire camaraderie and build a stronger SOE program. Improved teacher education courses on SOE build enthusiasm in both new and experienced instructors. Maintaining student-teacher ratio at a workable level, maximum of 60:1, and promoting the continuation of 12-month extended contracts will motivate the continuation of active SOE programs.

#### Summary

A look into the future has necessitated viewing the past. Many SOE standards, summarized by Maltby in 1928, have provided the backbone for today's "successful" SOE concept. Maltby (1928) listed the following standards: carefully prepared written plans, accurate record keeping, a supervised practice program continued and developed during the student's secondary school years, the student's assumption of financial and physical responsibility during his/her program, and careful interpretations of past records to assist in future planning. These standards are still applicable in today's vocational agriculture program and join together to provide a solid SOE foundation.

Previously cited studies have indicated that quality SOE programs encourage and motivate students. The concept of SOE has stood the test of time and has made a difference in the lives of many students. SOE programs designed to meet the educational needs of the students must continue as an integral part of today's vocational agriculture program. Vocational agriculture teachers must learn from past experiences and provide the opportunity for their students to gain concrete real experiences in the many facets of the agriculture industry through quality SOEs.

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