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CERTIFICATION OF TEACHERS OF VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE

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Because of a shortage of certified teachers to fill vacancies in vocational agriculture in the nation, there is an increased interest on the part of state school administrators, supervisors of vocational agriculture, local school administrators, prospective teachers and others in matters relating to certification. There seems to be agreement among those concerned that certification requirements should be changed to meet present needs. Some of the suggestions coming from interested people and groups could be considered improvements, and others need further study and deliberation. Some experienced teachers of vocational agriculture feel that the requirements are about right or should even be raised. Some individuals who are not now certified feel that standards are too high. Some are not too concerned whether the requirements are too high or too low, but they feel that certification should be made more flexible. These concerns are to be expected, especially during times when the demand for teachers of vocational agriculture outstrips the available supply.

Approximately one thousand teachers are licensed or certified by state departments of education to teach vocational agriculture in the United States each year. Since the passage of the Vocational Education Act of 1963, more and more attractive opportunities have developed not only for the experienced teacher, but for the college graduate. Even if all the newly certified men accepted teaching positions there would still be vacancies to fill. What should be done about the vacancies is a real problem in most states.

Differences of opinion have developed concerning the maintenance of on-going departments of vocational agriculture when vacancies occur. Some persons hold to the belief that departments ought to be closed if a fully certified teacher of vocational agriculture cannot be employed. Others will compromise by stating that a person who is almost fully certified will suffice for a short period or until he meets the requirements. In cases where a fully

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certified teacher resigns after the school year has started, some feel that a temporary certificated teacher may be used until the end of the school year. There are a few who are advocating that departments should be kept open even though no qualified person can be employed to fill the position. These various beliefs reflect the values that different individuals place on the importance of the learner (the student enrolled in vocational agriculture classes), the teacher, the established department, and the profession.

Certificates are issued to individuals who meet certain requirements or who have graduated from an approved-program institution. The minimum requirements prescribed influence not only the students or prospective teachers, but also the teacher education institutions and the school boards employing vocational agriculture teachers. It is obvious that teacher education institutions must provide the necessary education and training to enable the students to meet the standards, and secondly, local boards of education can function only within defined limits in employing and retaining teachers of vocational agriculture.

The education of youngsters is considered a function of the state, therefore, it is logical that certification of teachers is likewise a state function. The state has the authority and responsibility of protecting the public by certifying only persons trained and prepared to function as teachers of vocational agriculture. A state, through its board of education, sets the minimum standards of certification of teachers. It also may prescribe other requirements deemed necessary for a vocational agriculture teacher to operate within the state. Some states have many standards and others have only a few. The standards, however, usually involve the minimum training level of the beginning teacher and the amount and kind of instruction in agriculture and professional education. The baccalaureate degree in agriculture is the usual minimum base covering the total training. In some states general or liberalizing education requirements are prescribed, and in others they are not. The course and credit specifications in general, agricultural and professional education vary from state to state.

One of two approaches has been used in setting up certification regulations in most states. One is the course-credit requirement approach and the other is the approved-program approach. To illustrate, for many years Tennessee followed the course-credit requirement approach. A person applying for a certificate to teach vocational agriculture would submit a transcript of courses and credits to the certifying agency in the state department of education for evaluation. If the applicant met the minimum requirements in terms of courses and credits he was eligible for full certification. If he did not, he could become eligible by completing the missing

courses and/or credits. Approximately a decade ago Tennessee shifted to the approved-program approach.

The approved-program approach requires each teacher education institution to design and submit a total program for the education and training of teachers of vocational agriculture to the state board of education for approval. The state department of education usually prescribes some minimums that must be met in the program. If the state board approves the program, the approved program becomes a guide for the teacher education institution. This approach then places upon the teacher education institutions the responsibility of recommending or not recommending its graduates for certification. This approved-program approach seems to have more flexibility and freedom than the course-credit requirement. It has developed from needs and experiences in certification, and the present trend is toward this new approach.

During an emergency or critical shortage of teachers, problems are created when approved-program institutions cannot train enough persons to fill all the vacancies. Unless concessions are made, there is no way for a person who is not a graduate of an approved-program institution to become eligible for full certification. Most institutions approved for teacher education in vocational agriculture in the United States are land grant institutions. The difference between program requirements in an approved program institution and program requirements in nonland grant institutions is usually large. This difference is to be expected. It would be impractical for most nonland grant college graduates to try to meet certification requirements through the approved-program approach at a land grant institution, because this would require the applicant to complete all requirements for a baccalaureate degree. In order for persons from nonland grant colleges to become fully certified within a reasonable length of time, it is apparent that adjustments are needed in the present certification structure in some states. Many adjustments can be made without lowering standards significantly. A comparison of approved-programs in the various states show much variation, so there are apparently few, if any, absolutes in certification. The point has been reached where certification equals competent teaching.

Let us not forget, however, that the certification of vocational agriculture teachers has been a powerful force in helping the profession to maintain high standards. Too frequently school boards have been willing to employ inadequately trained persons to fill teaching positions. Enforcement of certification standards has prevented the diluting of local programs with unqualified personnel. The National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards recently issued a warning against employing unqualified teachers to meet the shortage crisis. "Such practices," says the Commission, "only tend to worsen the problem, because low standards drive intelligent and talented people away from the field."

Positive steps should be taken in many states to study the situation in depth. Changes are needed to place more responsibility on the profession, break down barriers between states and establish a reciprocity pact based on the approve-program approach, simplify certification procedures and provide more flexibility.

Our profession has an opportunity now and in the years ahead to make significant contributions to improve certification of teachers of vocational agriculture in the nation. It goes without saying that if we do not provide the leadership, someone else probably will.

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