

CAN FEEDBACK HELP OUR PROFESSION?

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If Vocational Agriculture as a profession were improved, would more of the instructors make teaching a life-time career? The answer seems obvious. The profession's well-being, prestige, and its probable effects on students certainly would be improved by being able to hold its best professionals. Efforts to accomplish that goal should be encouraged.

How can a profession be improved? Should goals, ideals, entrance requirements or methods of evaluating the profession be altered? Should instructors, teacher educators, and administrators be more carefully selected and effectively educated? Changes in either individual or organizational areas can effect change in a profession.

Surveys of Agricultural Education Graduates

At Kansas State University, graduates of Agricultural Education have been feeding back ideas and facts which are used to improve undergraduate teacher training. Two surveys of all Agricultural Education graduates of five years earlier were made in 1968 and in 1969. In 1970, another survey was made of graduates who had been out ten years. The results provided information useful to curriculum and course changes.

During the three years surveyed, 61 had graduated in Agricultural Education, 51 (84%) responded to the surveys. Forty-three percent of those out of college five years were teaching Vocational Agriculture. Another nine percent were teaching in other categories. Twenty-seven percent of those out ten years were teaching Vocational Agriculture, and another twenty percent were teaching in other levels and areas.

Forty-four percent of those not teaching were in ag-related business and industry; twenty-eight percent were in government (including college non-teaching positions; twenty-four percent in farming; and four percent in private business not related to farming.

The three most valuable subject areas, according to the Vocational Agriculture teachers and the other Agricultural Education graduates who were not Vocational Agriculture teachers, were animal sciences, crops and soil, and farm mechanics.

Kansas is an agricultural State dominated by livestock and crops. Would preparing college students to teach in such a State result in weakening their training for broader national and international work?

Lengthen the Curriculum?

Two of the graduates suggested lengthening the curriculum to five years. This would allow for additional course work and as Ritzer (1970) stated, "In general, we may say that the longer and more rigorous the period of initiation into an occupation, the more culture and technique are associated with it, and the more deeply impressed are its attitudes upon the person."

If our goal is to move Vocational Agriculture toward a profession as opposed to an occupation, the longer preparation time, as well as improving the controlling aspects of the organization, should be included. "The more professional the occupation, the more likely the individuals in that occupation are to be professional at the individual level Should the occupation continually fail to adequately socialize its new members, the professional standing of the occupation will ultimately be jeopardized" (Ritzer, 1970). Ideally, longer preparation time will develop more professional characteristics but when teachers with only four years of college can be hired by the local school districts, administrators yield to the pressures of budgets and salary scales and hire the person available, regardless of the length of the candidate's professional training.

Why have one-half the Agricultural Education graduates left teaching or not entered it at all? Financial reasons and family responsibilities may be the overriding causes. . . . "In 1900, fifty-three percent of the male teachers were single, but by 1960 only sixteen percent of them were single. The greater proportion of married males, experiencing financial responsibility for a family and deprivation of income, easily leads them to become discontented with their chosen occupation" (Marcus, 1973).

More Specialization?

Has the vocational agriculture teacher preparation in Kansas kept pace with specialization needs? The curriculum was altered in 1972 to allow for specialization in Animal Sciences, Crops and Soils, Horticulture, Agricultural Mechanics, and Agribusiness. This addition or flexibility may not in itself be sufficient. Subject matter content requiring work beyond the B.S. degree for instructors teaching in specialized areas and in adult and young farmer classes is highly desirable if our goal is professional improvement. Instructors teaching at the secondary level, only, also need opportunities to keep abreast of changes. "Perhaps the most obvious change within schools has been the increased specialization of the teaching staff Specialization has occurred because of the explosion of wide dissemination of knowledge requiring teachers to educate students who have easy access to mass media as well as exposure to and training by relatively well-educated parents" (Marcus, 1973). Multiple teacher departments offer the administrative base for additional professional improvement in specialized areas.

Can local school administration give the necessary assistance to improve Vocational Agriculture? Principals, superintendents and boards of education do not need to know the specific subject matter nor the teaching techniques to be of excellent help to the program. But their work in policy making, implementation and evaluation can be enhanced by a competent Vocational Agriculture instructor.

"Increased teacher specialization has made it exceedingly difficult for principals and other administrators to supervise work or to judge performance. . . . The entire problem is compounded because the teacher performs in a relatively sheltered, nonvisible environment where norms of classroom autonomy and sanctity prevail" (Marcus, 1973). However, the agriculture program is to a large extent open to the public. Crops, livestock, equipment and buildings are essentially on display for everyone's inspection.

Occupation or Profession?

According to the old tradition, a professional was a person who publicly avowed a "calling," and then committed himself to pursue an occupation requiring long preparation, special skill, and extraordinary knowledge. For a time, only theology, law, and medicine qualified as professions. Later, colleges gradually gained power to set standards for attaining professional status. Professionalism thus came to mean acquiring expertness in certain socially admired occupations in a manner defined and accredited by institutions of higher learning (Gallas and Smith, 1973).

From years of teaching Vocational Agriculture and experience in supervision and administration, teachers have been observed who clearly demonstrated "professional" traits and skills. Other instructors have had attitude or commitment problems. Some of the difficulties might be improved by changes in the university curriculum. Certainly our programs need to be frequently reviewed so that the educational needs of pre-service and in-service teachers will be met. A part of that need is in developing self-confidence and maturity. Also important is an effective, complete, public relations program for the total teaching program in agriculture. If the program is truly no more than classroom instruction, and the proper base in local agricultural commodity groups, service organizations, and the public has not been built, the salary levels probably will remain similar to other classroom teachers and many of our stronger teachers will continue to move to agribusiness positions.

The nature of the training program for teaching high school students might more properly be considered occupational. Public schools may not be able to support truly professional organizations and teachers. Regardless of the position one might champion, teacher educators need to constantly inquire of present Vocational Agriculture teachers as to their needs, desires and goals; so that feedback can be used to help improve teaching conditions and teacher satisfaction. These changes might retain more of the excellent teachers in teaching.

References

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