

## SPECIAL FEATURE-DEBATE THE ISSUES

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This issue of *The Journal* presents another in the series of "debate the issues" articles authored by leaders in agricultural education. The Role of Vocational Education in Agriculture is the focus of this debate. Martin McMillion, of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, advocates Economic Efficiency, while Maynard Iverson, of North Carolina State University, calls for Socialization.

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### THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN AGRICULTURE -- ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY

Martin B. McMillion  
Agricultural Education

Virginia Polytechnic Institute  
and State University

Vocational education is education for work, it is an education that should impinge upon the economy in a positive way. It should be cost effective. It should support and reinforce general education, but it should not be general education. Vocational education in agriculture is not for everybody. Human development is important as a vocational education activity, but not as an end in itself.

The foregoing statements represent a rather conservative view of what vocational agriculture is, what it should do, and who the clientele should be. This position is exaggerated somewhat by the writer for purposes of countering the position taken by Dr. Iverson in this same issue of *The Journal*. This article applies classical liberalism\* to the problems faced in vocational agriculture today, that is, economic efficiency and the needs of industry are emphasized.

The following questions will be answered in conformity to the philosophical position of the article:

1. Should agricultural programs in the public schools be started or continued because of the needs of the student or should the needs of the economy (society) dominate?

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\*A liberal position a century ago, discussed by Herbert Spencer, Max Weber and others, but which is now a conservative position.

(McMillion--continued from page 2)

2. Should general education-type competencies such as public speaking and parliamentary procedure be emphasized at the expense of competencies which are more directly job-related.
3. Are the time and money expenditures for career choice education excessive in relation to the expenditures for career preparation?
4. Should vocational agriculture serve persons who have little likelihood of benefiting the agricultural economy or even themselves?
5. Should human resources and their development take precedence over natural and capital resources?
6. Should equality take precedence over liberty in vocational agriculture or even in our society?
7. Should vocational agriculture teach for a uniformity of values or accept social pluralism?

#### *Needs of Student vs Needs of the Economy*

The "primacy of the individual" sounds good. Serving the needs of the individual is the human thing to do, but serving individuals in vocational programs for which there are no jobs is an inhumane thing to do. Furthermore, it is not an economical thing to do.

Vocational programs are begun because of manpower needs, because of available jobs. Advisory councils recommend new vocational programs because of a need for workers, usually not because a group of students are interested in a particular subject area. Admittedly, many programs once in operation continue beyond the time for which there is a need for workers. The initiation of a program normally is an event in which a decision is made, while the continuance of a program is a process--maybe a slow death. Some programs appear to gradually become hobby courses whose teachers and students are strangers to the agricultural business and industry for which the subject matter should be related. In such a situation the needs of the teacher are met by having an enrollment and teaching his/her choice of subject matter. The interests, if not needs, of the student are presumably met.

A group of teachers and students engaging in their favorite hobby while expending vocational education funds is a luxury which tax payers cannot afford at the present time. The needs of the economy, of society at large, are primary in a vocational

education program. The needs and interests of the student and those of the teacher are secondary.

Once the vocational competencies needed in the job market are determined, attention can turn to the individual. Individualization in the methodology of teaching is not contrary to the position taken in this article. Individual differences in learning styles and individual interests and backgrounds should be considered in teaching the students the competencies needed in the workplace. A limited amount of time should be devoted to occupational choice in which the student examines the nature of the job and his/her own characteristics. Attention is given to the individual, but not blindly so.

### *Teach Competencies That Are More Job Oriented*

Job relevant instruction is important; agriculturally relevant instruction is important. Teach those competencies, including knowledge, attitudes and skills that are most important in the workplace. Skills which are seldom if ever used at the workplace, such as parliamentary law, should be treated as less important in the curriculum. Some instruction in parliamentary procedure is needed if the FFA is to accomplish its objectives, but one week of group instruction in parliamentary procedure in four years is more appropriate than two weeks every year. Public speaking, another general skill, is more easily justified than parliamentary procedure, but is also taught excessively. Many schools spend a couple of weeks every year having students write and give speeches, not to mention the days that the class serves as the audience for the speaker who is going to represent the chapter.

Human development is important, but that development in vocational agriculture should be oriented to a vocational purpose which justifies continued expenditures to a cost conscious public for a program of the scope now conducted.

### *Spend More on Job Preparation and Less on Job Selection*

Exploratory education is focused on the need of the individual more than on the needs of the industry. Exploratory education would seem to fare less well in a cost-benefit analysis than other phases of the program if indeed an analysis could be conducted to show the cost-benefit of exploratory education. The economic efficiency position is one that favors the most employment relevant kinds of vocational education. Adult education is especially favored because the enrollees are already in the jobs for which they are seeking improvement.

In the State of Virginia, 70 of 382 teachers of agriculture taught in junior high schools, middle schools, or intermediate schools during 1981-82, as determined by a count from the directory of teachers. The State of Florida uses about half of its agriculture teachers to teach exploratory agriculture according to an agriculture teacher educator there. Nationally, 3.4 percent of agriculture teachers in 1981 taught in junior high schools, according to Craig (1982, p. 11). That amounted to 421 teachers. Those teachers, if teaching farm business management to adults, would make a better contribution to the economy.

Group instruction as a guidance function which has been prominent in the last decade came in with the career education movement. It appears to have developed into prevocational education or general education in agriculture for one or two years with a limited career choice function. Most of the vocational agriculture enrollment in Virginia, and apparently in other states, is in exploratory and basic agriculture. Economic efficiency will be enhanced by a shorter exploration and decision period and a higher proportion of the enrollment continuing on through the junior and senior year.

Prior to the career education movement, career choice was integrated into subject matter lessons. For example, a lesson on how to cruise timber would include the nature of the job. When the soil conservation agent helped with soil judging, he would be asked about his profession.

Career choice was once one of the primary topics of discussion during home visits to prospective students and during the project supervision which followed in subsequent years. Integrated coverage of career information and attention to career choice could very well make it possible to reduce the years devoted to the needs and desires of the individual and focus more attention on the needs of the industry and the agricultural economy.

### *Vocational Agriculture Is Not All Things to All People*

Ask not what agriculture can do for you, ask what you can do for agriculture. How many of the students served in vocational agriculture will have an economic impact on agriculture? How many will never be employed in agriculture? How many would not make much of a contribution if they were employed in agriculture?

The generally accepted principle in agricultural education and vocational education is that those served by the educational program should be those who want it, need it, and can profit

from it. Hamlin (1963, p. 101) added "or can be led to want it."

In our agriculture classrooms today are students who don't want to be there and can't be led to want to be there; the potential benefit to these students and agriculture is questionable. Furthermore, many of the clientele who are interested and are learning do not intend to use what they learn occupationally.

A more selected clientele can be advocated without the one advocating it being labeled an elitist. Jobs in agriculture which must be done require trained workers from the semi-skilled level up to highly technical and management levels. The entire taxonomy of agriculture includes jobs for which certain schools should provide education and training.

Economic conditions have forced cutbacks in programs in agriculture and might force more. Those who do not want to think about priorities must think about them. We may need to go beyond the question of who can profit from vocational agriculture and ask who can profit most from vocational agriculture.

The extent to which society profits from providing education is a question that must be faced. Society benefits more from providing education to some individuals than to others. Even a compassionate people whose tax revenues are low might have to ask anew the question: Who shall be served by vocational education and to what extent?

### *Don't Forget Natural and Capital Resources*

Human resource development is the mission of education and naturally assumes prominence in the educational setting. Human, natural, and capital resources are each indispensable to economic efficiency and none should be thought of as taking precedence. A book by Evans and Herr (1978) says the U.S. has gone through three periods in which various resources have dominated. The first period was one in which natural resources were dominant; the second, which coincided with the industrial revolution, was one in which capital resources were dominant. The third period was and is, according to the authors, one in which human resources dominate.

The relative importance of the categories of resources can shift from time to time. Natural resources assumed a higher level of importance at the time of the oil embargo and thereafter. Lack of investment capital and its availability for development of more efficient means of production assumes greater importance in a time when the government competes with

business and industry to borrow from a tight supply of money and the steel mills and auto plants of other countries become more modern and efficient than our own.

Vocational agriculture programs should emphasize natural resource management, including wise use, conservation, preservation, and renewal of those resources which are renewable and recycling those which can be. Energy, soil and water must be conserved and tree plantations need to be renewed. Sufficient human resources which believe in natural resource management and can practice it are also needed.

Vocational agriculture programs should emphasize securing sufficient capital on the best terms to provide capital assets needed for economic efficiency. Proper mechanization for production efficiency and economic efficiency should be emphasized. Human resources are needed which can do things such as financial planning, budgetary analysis, records analysis, and tax management.

It is conceded that human resource development in vocational agriculture is important, but not as an end in itself. It is important because of what that development can do in terms of the management of natural resources, capital, and personnel.

### *Equal Opportunity or Extra Opportunity*

Democracy once meant an equal chance; it meant liberty. It meant giving an equal chance for students to develop their unequal capacities. In recent times, democracy in education has meant equal attainment through extra and remedial efforts. Equality and liberty are not fully compatible. While attention is being given to equal attainment, the opportunity for full realization of potential of higher ability students may be stifled. An educational program that is designed to make graduates equal could also make graduates equally mediocre.

A lock-step, by the numbers, competency-based check off of skills needed for entry level workers which all students must do will, over a period of time, start attracting students who are rather equal in potential to learn. Our educational programs must be designed to offer something to the talented student, too. Complex problems, as well as low-level skills, must be the subject matter of vocational agriculture.

Simplifying the subject matter and spending a disproportionate amount of time with the lower end of the class year after year will transform the teacher into a special education teacher without ever leaving his/her present position.

Assuming that "brain drain" has not already taken place in agriculture, the variation in ability is broad. Even if separate activities are designed for the mainstreamed and the talented, a teacher still must decide where to focus his/her effort. The effort should provide an equal chance for all to reach their potential, but agricultural education cannot do all things for all people. It is a program of economic development first and a social program second, if at all. Federal education funds have increasingly been directed to the purpose of social reform, but education for social reasons without attention to economic efficiency is only feasible in wealthy countries for the period of time that they remain wealthy.

### *Uniform Values at the Work Place*

Ours is a pluralistic society -- a nation of immigrants. A diversity of ethnic groups that maintains the values, especially work values, of the homeland is not in the best interest of the nation and its economic well-being. The work values needed for a productive economy are well defined. The melting pot approach is the preferred approach as it relates to work values and to a considerable extent, the broader values of a society.

Cultural pluralism has been overemphasized by educators and the government. Not long ago, federal legislation was passed for funding the teaching of students in their native language. Adherents to cultural pluralism give the impression that a person is intolerant if he/she disapproves of values and customs of others, even if they relate to work. The vocational agriculture teacher who insists that students use good craftsmanship, follow safe practices, get to class on time, keep accurate records, and treat individuals and property with respect is not imposing his/her values upon the student. The teacher is teaching the competencies desired in the work place by employers and those that are associated with productivity.

### *Summary*

Classical liberalism was the position of the merchant class and the so-called captains of industry. Manpower and capital for business and industry were primary. Classical liberalism recognized the inequality of ability among persons. All persons were not expected to benefit equally from education. Survival of the fittest as a social kind of evolution was expected. Freedom from restraints of government and others were expected for the group that held the classical liberal view. The value and protection of personal property was revered. Poverty was a sign of incompetence. Taxation was theft. Those

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