

SPECIAL FEATURE DEBATE THE ISSUES

This issue of *The Journal* continues the series of "debate the issues" articles authored by leaders in agricultural teacher education. The focus of this debate is on the location of federal-level administration of vocational agriculture/agribusiness: Should the program be administered in the U.S. Department of Agriculture or in the U.S. Department of Education. The authors are Lloyd H. Blanton, Clemson University, and Earl B. Russell, University of Illinois. The editor welcomes reactions from readers about this debate.

VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE SHOULD BE ADMINISTERED
THROUGH THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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"The object of our discussion is not that my words may triumph over yours, nor that yours may gain victory over mine, but that between us, we may discover the most perfect truth." -- Socrates

Significant numbers of the vocational agriculture community are calling attention to and questioning problems within the profession. Some have looked to different patterns of administration at the Federal level of government, especially the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Some believe the adage that "when the eraser is used up before the pencil, there have been too many errors" to be appropriate. Not all of the problems or errors of vocational agriculture can be cured by USDA administration, but several can be. Among desirable changes, these possibilities exist:

1. Vocational agriculture removed from the constrictions of the industrial management patterns used by public schools.
2. Management of vocational agriculture entrusted to USDA-- knowledgeable, capable, empathetic agricultural educators since 1914.

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(Blanton, continued from page 2)

3. Unity of purpose guiding creative efforts of agricultural education.
4. An articulated agricultural education preparing for semi-skilled, technical, managerial, and professional careers in agriculture, including entrepreneurship.
5. Agriculturists know agriculture best and provide latest technologies--USDA is effective in delivery of technology.

The following points, defensive disclaimers to avoid premature perfidious characterizations, are offered: (1) Program specialists and supervisors *have* effectively nurtured vocational agriculture, especially prior to 1963; (2) AVA will continue to be a primary voice for vocational education; (3) Vocational agriculture professionals should continue affiliations with AVA; and (4) Educational administrators *can* be informed advocates for vocational agriculture.

However, contemplating USDA administration of vocational agriculture offers a welcome respite from the arduous fights to retain the viscera of vocational agriculture. Wasteful battles continue as uninformed administrators and advocates--in name only--strain to drag vocational agriculture to an unparalleled level of mediocrity.

Uninformed Management--No Advocate for Vocational Agriculture

Characterizing the management pattern for public schools as an unfortunate error fathered by Horace Mann, Hart (1981, pp. 8, 11) said:

Change in the schools is, in the classic phrase, like rearranging the deck chair on the Titanic ... because it was cheap and manageable, Mann's system took hold rapidly in the more populated areas. Unfortunately, however, it never worked in the sense of producing learning reliably and soon turned instead to *stressing order*, morality, *conformity* and those behaviors most suitable to docile industrial labor. And the whole enterprise could be run like a factory, with female teachers as the 'hands,' male principals as foremen, and superintendents as managers.

Although fine exceptions exist, management for education, including vocational agriculture, has a penchant for achieving

conformity. Current patterns use multi-levels and multi-channels of management. Each level and channel harbors a source of interpretive error which affects program direction and process and where conformity, categorization, and directives are sought and persist.

Agriculture is a mystery to many decision makers; many are uncomfortable with vocational agriculture. As a restless insomniac fights a pillow, vocational agriculture has been squeezed, fluffed, stretched and folded, a victim of uncomfortable management. Many administrators squirm because they find supervised occupational experience (SOE) programs "hard to manage," field trips "costly and unnecessary," twelve-months contracts "hard to explain to other teachers," "vocational agriculture not fitting the pattern we have in this school," "FFA unimportant," adult work "not our responsibility," "the program more expensive than English, math, or science," and "fewer farmers in our community."

A serious error persists, one that Prosser (1925, p. 221), an early vocational education proponent, fostered:

It has become customary to recognize in the total field of vocational education at least four kinds of divisions: agricultural, commercial, industrial and home making. This is the classification set up in the National Vocational Act and has been generally accepted. In the past there has been an unfortunate tendency on the part of specialists in these different fields to feel that they had little in common ... In general, however, it is becoming generally accepted by workers ... that vocational education is vocational education, regardless of whether it deals with agriculture or industry, or any other phase of economic activity, even including the professions.

How much impact that myth of commonality has had on the architects of vocational agriculture is unknown. But that concept, misguided as it is, continues today to take a heavy toll upon the effectiveness of vocational agriculture.

Perhaps haggard school management is due a favor. Administrative responsibilities and the current funding for vocational agriculture could be shifted to USDA and (1) relieve public school administrators of burdensome, uncomfortable management of vocational agriculture programs and dollars and (2) unify local agricultural education in securing funds, students, educators, placement opportunities and teaching resources, along with broadened visibility and support.

Innovative techniques for accurately defining occupations are beginning to provide insight into the uniqueness of agriculture vis-a-vis some other vocational education areas (Lyson, 1979).

In almost all prestige ranking schemes the occupation "farmer" is treated as a monolithic, homogenous category. There is no appreciation of differences between, for example, the subsistence Appalachian dirt farmer and the millionaire Texas rancher.

Myths of agriculture's unimportance to non-rural areas are beginning to be exposed by empirical data. One study of the "industrialized northeast" is on target with conclusions such as the following.

Indeed, it is probable that urban counties' population centers of 10,000 or more historically exist primarily due to the agricultural viability of these counties, even if today there are other facilities which also contribute to their export base ... (and) ... a viable agriculture will be significantly important in affecting a viable community structure, which also makes the obverse true, that where agriculture is less viable, non-metropolitan [\leq 50,000 population] communities are also likely to be less viable. (Eberts, pp. 2, 8, 18).

USDA--Experienced Educators Since 1914--And Before

Striking similarities of purpose exist for agriculture in the Smith-Lever (1914), Smith-Hughes (1917), George-Ellzey (1934), George-Deen (1936), and George-Barden (1946) legislation. Not until the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (Public Law 88-210), and subsequent 1968 and 1976 amendments, were interpretations so narrowly conceived as to lose sight of service areas such as agriculture. Replacing support of viable service area programs, dollars were thrown at assorted goodies that continue to reduce vocational agriculture to a baby-sitting service for the unmotivated, anti-agriculture student. SOE programs experienced atrophy; the sense of community languished; students lost the personalized attention leading to job counseling and placement (or advanced education); adult/young farmer instruction waned; teachers lost intimate contact with the agricultural community; school administrators lost the wise counsel of vocational agriculture supervisors; teachers experienced isolation and esprit-de-corps died where vocational agriculture inservice education faded. In short, "the eraser wore out!"

Vocational agriculture has struggled historically to secure a voice in Education (Stenzel and Wall, 1973). As a minority in AVA, vocational agriculture struggles for recognition of unique program needs and a broader vision of vocational education, one embracing the local community of agriculture and natural resources basic to agriculture.

In USDA, vocational agriculture would join efforts of an education/information agency dating to the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, three years earlier than Smith-Hughes. Under that Act, the Extension Service, with cooperation from the USDA, Land-Grant institutions and local governments was to:

... consist of the giving of instruction and practical demonstration in agriculture and home economics to persons not attending or resident in said colleges in the several communities, and imparting to such persons information on said subjects through field demonstrations, publications, and otherwise ..." (Baker, 1973, p. 81).

An updated memorandum of 1955 named nine areas of educational emphasis:

Efficiency in agricultural production; efficiency in marketing, distribution, and utilization; conservation, development, and use of natural resources; management on the farm and in the home; family living; youth development; leadership development; community improvement and resource development; and public affairs." (Baker, 1973, p. 194).

The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) places films, slide sets, filmstrips, and video tapes at the disposal of vocational agriculture; CES and other divisions of USDA distribute technical and consumer-oriented publications for educational purposes. The Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), another agency of the USDA, has supported vocational agriculture by generously funding FFA community development activities through the FFA BOAC program and by making available to vocational agriculture students needed capital for good-risk ventures in agriculture. Other agencies providing educational media and assistance to vocational agriculture include the U.S. Forest Service; Soil Conservation Service; Agricultural Marketing Service; Economics, Statistics, and Cooperative Services; and the World Food and Agricultural Outlook Board. In addition, the USDA is looking into prospects for a clearing house for instructional materials in agriculture.

Two studies cited as follows are positive illustrations that USDA delivers successfully with high community/clientele input.

The first is a nationwide study about USDA community resource development (CRD) programming.

Citizens perceived ... (that) programs have above average support ... (and) ... that people participated in CRD program planning and program implementation ... Another indication of community support is ... that CRD ... (was) above average in coordinating efforts with community development of other agencies ... The highest perception of community support was indicated relative to the extent to which CRD programs were consistent with citizens' perceptions of needs. (Mulford, 1980, p. 24).

A second effort, seeking a source for energy alternatives, looked to an agency with a history for delivery (Cross, 1980, p. 2).

The agricultural experiment stations [USDA agency] were selected as a population because they were considered the most likely ... having on hand pamphlets available free or at low cost. The stations are tied in ... to the cooperative extension service, which has available at its offices, and makes available through workshops and seminars, information dealing with energy conservation and alternatives.

Success of USDA educational efforts is due in part to dynamic, innovative thrusts. The 4-H programs were quick to broaden learning activities/projects to reflect the changing interests and needs of youth, both rural and urban.* Extension education pioneered the use of broadcast facilities for mass education; retail businesses and shopping malls became favorite sites for educating/informing. USDA programs have been perceptively responsive.

*Vocational Agriculture and USDA--
Unity of Educational Purpose and Voice*

Harrison (1979) reported that Extension agents, specialists and administrators perceived a unity of purpose, program areas, and clientele. The report showed a priority on education, including program content and methodology, problem identification

*Dr. Russell, some readers may recall the difficulty encountered in early efforts to admit girls, to broaden scope, to facelift the FFA, and to convince school personnel of the value of attending the National FFA Convention.

and problem solving, and diffusion of new technology. They also preferred administration by educational institutions--colleges and universities--as opposed to state government. The thrust was uniform, professional approaches to educating people in practical, situation-based and problem-centered experiences. Surely those with reasonable judgment recognize a unity of purpose in vocational agriculture and USDA.

Shadle (1980) reported "inadequate administration support and backing" as a major reason for teachers leaving the profession. Gott (1980) reported a disparity of opinion between teachers and administrators of such scope that large segments of vocational agriculture were jeopardized. Administrators saw little value in SOE programs and also differed with teachers about the utility of adult/young farmer education.

Declaring program and teacher acceptance as necessary, Rasmussen (1965, p. 238) said that:

Not a single ... teacher will be able to devote his energies freely toward his primary goal if he feels that by so doing he will be alienated from and disvalued by his colleagues ... (and school) principal ...

To survive, many vocational agriculture programs have taken on the trappings of industrial arts and trade and industrial courses, bearing little likeness to vocational agriculture, while conforming to the distorted images of many federal, state, and local administrators. They have lost vision and purpose.

Many of today's spokespersons for agriculture cannot utter "vocational agriculture" because of conditioning to say "vocational education." What is wrong in being pro-agriculture and pro-vocational education? Years spent trying to communicate with AVA produce disappointing, puzzling results at times. The role of vocational agriculture in AVA is significant; dues paid to AVA by educators in vocational agriculture are important; and contacts that agricultural educators can and do make with legislators are essential. Yet an AVA publication (1981), designed to inform legislators of the need for reauthorization of vocational education legislation, distorted vocational agriculture by its indirect reference to the program. This single reference to agriculture spoke of the decreasing numbers of farm workers, as if the need for vocational agriculture was directly related to this decrease. The fact that the agricultural industry is our largest and most efficient and that vocational agriculture serves this industry, not just farming, was omitted.

In 1951, NVATA and AVA successfully fought a congressional bill seeking transfer of vocational agriculture to USDA (NVATA,

1973, p. 29). At AVA in Atlanta, 1981, NVATA will likely get a chance, after thirty years as an affiliate of AVA, to reconsider. Perhaps the vote to study USDA affiliation is more realistic today, after careful analysis of recent errors against vocational agriculture.

Advisory committees are supposed to provide local, lay input to legitimize and shape vocational programs. However, school administrators look with contempt upon significant lay efforts. Current literature abounds with documentation, but two references will suffice for our purposes. According to one (Nolte, 1976), "The involvement of organized citizen groups in public education is like the flu--it's been around for a long time, you occasionally 'catch' it, and sometimes it can make you downright sick ..." Perry and Ridgley (1979) postulate that schools have grown deaf to citizens and in so doing have lost much of the interest and respect of citizens. Further they say, "It would appear that school control has been wrested from the people as evidenced by their inability to influence policy." Both positions underline the futility of leaving vocational agriculture programs in their current situations, where community support and input is often ignored by school administrators because vocational agriculture does not readily fit a standard educational mold.

Agriculturists Know Agriculture Best

Shinn and Cheek (1981) reported that teacher education for vocational agriculture should reside, along with Cooperative Extension training, in colleges of agriculture. "Colleges of agriculture are dedicated to the improvement of agriculture and the educational growth of incumbent and future professional agriculturists; colleges of education are not." The same logic concludes that a similar arrangement for vocational agriculture would mean administration by an agency of government with an enthusiastic and legal interest in both agriculture and people. The focus would be on improving people and their use of technology, not on monitoring extreme and useless regulations.

AVA Executive Director, Dr. Gene Bottoms, is on target by saying national policy must change (*Voc. Ed.*, 1981). We need a policy that will permit--in fact, encourage--heterogeneity of interests, teaching/learning styles, resources utilization, and compatible supervision and management styles. And we add, vocational agriculture concerns agriculture and people; it can't be square-pegged into a round hole. People who make decisions about program content and procedures must be agriculturists trained to manage education. While heterogenous parties can unite for common concerns and for professional enrichment, such

as in AVA, a basic principle is that people make decisions for themselves, not for others.

Speaking for adult education in vocational agriculture, Persons (1980) presented a landmark position calling for policy change. Among salient points, he said that:

... there is a lack of identifiable program characteristics among schools, states, and regions that provide clear definition to program philosophy, objectives, content, procedures and outcomes ... Some state agencies have in fact abrogated responsibility for such instruction ... Without a change in national leadership, federal and state commitment to programs and local support, it is unlikely that the current status of adult and young farmer education programs will change ...

The same comments could also be applied to other phases of vocational agriculture. Such is also the case for Persons' continuation:

There are at least four areas in which money and manpower are needed: research, teacher education, supervision and curriculum support. Without them local programs are like a rudderless ship, moving endlessly in random directions without focus or leadership ... The gradual erosion of the effectiveness of state staffs must be reversed. [Author's note: Perhaps USDA will be more attentive than present managers.] They have been not only eroded in number, but by dilution of their responsibilities (in order) to serve all vocational fields ... Curriculum development and support are deficient; lacking national scope and direction ...

To most long-time observers of vocational agriculture, a major thrust for a carefully designed, articulated and implemented program is a must; the time for action grows short.

To me as a taxpayer, block grants reported in *Update* (May/June, 1981) are attractive; as a vocational agriculture proponent, I'm scared to death of what "our friends" in vocational education might do to us.

We have two viable alternatives to catastrophe: (1) Program and professional standards protecting vocational agriculture from the conformists, the uninformed, and the antagonists who would reshape vocational agriculture to conform to their misguided images and (2) affiliation with a nationwide agricultural

agency such as USDA. (I never have enjoyed the role of "I told you so!") Agriculture, the industry, will support sound vocational agriculture programs. Evidence of support exists in every community where vocational agriculture follows strong traditional practices; in the large financial support of the National FFA Foundation; in every parent-student banquet saluting agriculture; and in every state legislature of agriculturally-based economies. However, those same supporters are hesitant to support the brand of vocational agriculture administered of late under the broad umbrella of vocational education. Permit this parallel: In Bethel Park, Pa., student-athletes pay a participation fee of up to \$35.00 for one sport. It works! People support things that are responsive to them. Agricultural industry will support quality vocational agriculture programs.

Suppose a USDA-operated program in public schools was articulated with a post-secondary technical or community college; suppose public school students were given an opportunity to participate in 4-H and FFA; suppose USDA's successful experience in local and university settings was utilized to maximize students' career options in the broad agricultural/natural resources areas.

The public is becoming more aware of USDA and agriculture. But, present structures, institutions and associations inhibit the ability of vocational agriculture to capitalize. The Mediterranean fruit fly episodes of the summer of 1981 underscore the fragile balance which sustains an adequate food supply. Freezing citrus and vegetable crops severely impact family budgets. High energy costs for irrigation and transportation may precipitate major shifts in food production centers. Viroid attacks on crops threaten local agricultural economies. Depletion of major aquifers and extended drought threaten potable water supplies and food production. Biomasses and solar energy alternatives are being researched to prevent a day of stilled machinery and chilled homes.

Affiliation with USDA puts vocational agriculture on the crest of Toffler's "third wave;" present arrangements doom vocational agriculture to the antiquity of his "first wave" (Toffler, 1980). Taxpayers deserve nothing less than a quality delivery system; USDA, already successful, and vocational agriculture can become a tandem unequalled in history, while maximizing utility of scarce resources.

If there is doubt that public schools will accept programs administered by outside agencies, two examples will suffice: CETA and ROTC do very well.

Summary

Administration by USDA will improve vocational agriculture and present at least five desirable possibilities: (1) more effective program management, (2) affiliation with agricultural educators who have been successful since 1914, (3) unity of educational purpose, (4) an articulated system of career preparation in agriculture, and (5) decision making by knowledgeable agricultural educators.

Other topics of promise include financial benefits of affiliation with USDA and the Federal retirement system; greater career mobility, both horizontal and vertical; greater liaison among agricultural community groups and agricultural organizations; and a more competent agricultural manpower. Not to be overlooked is the possibility that the Department of Education may be downgraded or dismantled; if vocational agriculture is not administered by USDA, it may be administered by the Department of Labor or the Department of Human Services.

Remember that "Rome wasn't built in a day," and it is not true that Nero's fiddle caused Rome's destruction.

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