

*. . . Contemplating USDA
administration of vocational
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respite from the arduous
fights to retain the viscera
of vocational agriculture.*

-Blanton

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-Russell

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

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Readers should be aware that Lloyd Blanton and I have had previous practice debating one another as graduate students several years ago. He and I have enjoyed light-hearted and serious discussions of issues surrounding vocational agriculture. Therefore, this opportunity to debate him in print for professional inspection is stimulating to me! I have conferred with Dr. Blanton on the major arguments he has in favor of administering vocational agriculture through USDA. Although I understand his points of view, I find them somewhat difficult to accept. I hope to communicate why.--EBR

The debate on the appropriate Federal department to administer vocational agriculture is an interesting and important one. It is related to the considerable discussion about the role and place of vocational agriculture in the public schools.

I contend that vocational agriculture should be administered through the U.S. Department of Education. I will make my arguments on the basis of mission, substance, and administration. It seems to me that the history and future of vocational agriculture at the Federal level is very much tied to the issues

embodied in these three areas.

Mission

The *United States Government Manual, 1980-1981* states:

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) . . . works to improve and maintain farm income and to develop and expand markets abroad for agricultural products. The Department helps to curb and to cure poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. It works to enhance the environment and to maintain our production capacity by helping landowners protect the soil, water, forests, and other natural resources. Rural development, credit, and conservation programs are key resources for carrying out national growth policies The Department, through inspection and grading services, safeguards and assures standards of quality in the daily food supply. (Office of the Federal Register, 1980, pp. 116, 118)

Conversely, this same *Manual* states:

The Department of Education is the Cabinet-level department which establishes policy, administers, and coordinates most Federal assistance to education The Secretary of Education advises the President on education plans, policies, and programs of the Federal Government. (p. 265)

It seems rather clear from the general mission statements of these two Federal government departments that vocational agriculture more nearly fits the general mission of the Department of Education than that of USDA. For example, the generally accepted national mission of vocational agriculture is to provide educational programs for preparing people for employment in a wide range of agricultural occupations. This general mission is being pursued through a variety of objectives which include preparation of people to make wise vocational choices, to develop leadership capacities, to prepare for citizenship, and even broader educational objectives.

While the major thrust of USDA is on agricultural commodities, the major thrust of vocational agriculture is on the "production" of better educated people. Vocational agriculture is essentially a human resource development program, not a program for the development of agricultural resources and commodity improvement.

Those who may be in favor of Federal administration of vocational agriculture through USDA probably would point to the programs of agricultural Extension which are administered through the Science and Education Administration of USDA. The *Manual* states that the basic mission of the Science and Education Administration is "to improve the nationwide effectiveness of research, extension, and teaching in the food and agricultural sciences." (p. 140) The *Manual* further states that the SEA, through its Extension program, is primarily concerned with

. . . financing and conducting educational programs to help the public learn about and apply to everyday activities the latest technology and management knowledge developed through research by the land-grant universities, the Department of Agriculture, and other sources. . . .to help them apply the newest proven technology and management techniques. . . (pp. 141-142)

On the other hand, the *Manual* indicates that the U.S. Department of Education has primary functions which include elementary and secondary education, as well as vocational and adult education. The *Manual* states:

The Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education administers programs of grants, contracts, and technical assistance for vocational and technical education, education professions development, community schools, and comprehensive employment and training. The Office is also responsible for providing a unified approach to rural and rural family education through the coordination of programs within the Department. (p. 268)

Therefore, it seems a distinction can be drawn between the mission of USDA and the U.S. Department of Education which suggests that USDA is primarily concerned with agricultural commodities and related production and technological concerns, while the U.S. Department of Education is concerned with broad educational issues which include the preparation of people for employment.

Substance

Related to the mission discussion above, the substance of vocational agriculture is essentially that it is an educational program, not an agricultural program. Vocational agriculture is part of a larger educational picture in the public schools.

Dr. Blanton's claim that we need to change the Federal level administration of vocational agriculture because the program is poorly understood by local school administrators seems to beg the question of where responsibility lies for local understanding. It seems somewhat far-fetched to me to assume that shifting administrative responsibility at the Federal level will do much if anything to enhance local understanding, which should be the primary responsibility of local and state leaders in vocational agriculture, and not that of Federal policy makers. So it seems the problem of public understanding should be dealt with in a context different from that of Federal level administration.

Related to the substance dimension, other educators need to view vocational agriculture as a partner in the total educational process. To separate vocational agriculture from the rest of education would have the effect of isolating vocational agriculture within the schools. It seems we should work to minimize isolation and to encourage integration of vocational agriculture into a larger educational scheme, rather than hold a philosophic and administrative stance which says we are "separate."

Another major substantive issue is that vocational agriculture is a part of vocational education. The U.S. Department of Education clearly has responsibility for vocational education in the Nation. If we were to encourage splitting off vocational agriculture from the rest of vocational education, vocational education policy as we know it could well disappear (while many people perhaps would applaud such a development!). However, such a precedent, were it to occur, could consequently lead to the separation or shift of distributive education and business and office education to some other department such as the U.S. Department of Commerce. Perhaps trade and industrial education would be moved to the U.S. Department of Labor. Home Economics may be placed in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or in USDA along with the home economics Extension program. Similarly, health occupations education might be placed in the Department of Health and Human Services.

Such a prospect for the reassignment of the vocational services to departments of government which seemingly correspond to their "substantive thrust" would bring about a tremendous splintering and isolations of programs. It would be extraordinarily difficult for communications to occur under such a scheme.

Administration

Our major professional organization, the American Vocational Association, provides a major advocacy function for vocational agriculture and the remainder of vocational education through its support of legislation favorable to vocational education. The present AVA staff is heavily overloaded, while they are obviously very effective in their myriad of activities. If vocational agriculture were to be placed in USDA, it is highly likely that AVA would be much less able to attend to concerns of vocational agriculture if the remainder of vocational education were to stay in the U.S. Department of Education. Vocational agriculture might simply be left out of AVA's legislative processes, or at least put in a position for secondary attention.

Further, if Dr. Blanton's logic were applied to the other vocational services and they were removed from the U.S. Department of Education and assigned to other departments of the Federal government, imagine the phenomenal complicating factors which would arise in administering AVA and in bringing about policy makers' support for vocational education in general. The concept seems very awkward at best.

The other dimension of administering vocational agriculture enters at the state level. Historically and at present vocational agriculture has been administered through state departments of education, not state departments of agriculture. To shift vocational agriculture at the Federal level to USDA, while vocational agriculture continues to be administered through state departments of education, would break down communications and add to bureaucratic confusion. (However, I suspect Dr. Blanton's subsequent argument would be that the administration of vocational agriculture at the state level should be moved to state departments of agriculture rather than remain in state departments of education.)

Under the present state administrative arrangement, to require state departments of education to work through USDA for the vocational agriculture program would dramatically increase administrative problems, paperwork, and intergovernmental conflict, while dramatically reducing state supervisors' time available to devote to assisting vocational agriculture teachers. In short, attention to administrative and monitoring activities would increase, while attention to assistance and improvement activities would diminish.

Therefore, it seems hard to accept the logic of vocational agriculture's administration through USDA for many reasons of mission, substance, and administration. To extend the logic of
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