

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFFECTIVE EXTENSION POLICY EDUCATION

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There are a number of reasons why policy education specialists should scrutinize their work and determine whether they are developing new audiences and increasing their contact with existing audiences.

First, we must be sensitive to allegations by our critics that we serve a limited clientele. Legislative members decide the level of resources that will be provided to support Extension work. The decisions are based on perceptions of how well we serve the needs of people. Critics say that Extension now serves only limited clientele. Substantial population shifts away from rural areas has produced states with actual or potential political control in metropolitan centers. Thus, a conflict exists between reaching new audiences and continuing to serve old ones in the same way. Policy education cannot avoid issues of interest to the urban audiences, nor can any other part of the Extension program.

Second, federal, state, and local government budgeting produces an awareness that decisions about Extension support are part of the political allocation process. Interest in zero-based budgeting suggests that there is nothing sacred about any type of government program, including ours.

Third, there are more regulatory agencies at both the state and federal level who are seeking a quasi-educational function to strengthen their position. They do not believe that regulation and education are two distinct functions.

Within Extension, we must carefully examine each part of our overall program. If some of our programs cannot generate support within the political decision-making process, we must ask whether we can afford to maintain those programs. We must take a political market approach to the choice of educational programs as opposed to a strictly educational one.

We must also re-examine the role of an Extension policy educator. It is education which provides the knowledge base on which people can make decisions.

Our major need is to build a competent staff, people who under-

stand the important issues of today. The kind of staff assigned policy education responsibility determines the issues that can be considered.

We also must examine the role of the specialist staff vis-a-vis that of the county-based staff. If specialists are primarily trainers for county agents, then policy issues must largely be county-oriented because of the location of the ultimate decision. Such a system works well for issues of land-use policy, but not well for issues of state tax policy. If specialists are the teachers of clientele, then issues of state-wide concern are a more realistic part of the program.

The ultimate limitations on policy education are staff expertise and research results. Research which examines consequences of alternative organizational approaches and cost-benefit analysis is fundamental. Without it, there is only conjecture as to the results of particular choices and one person's judgment is as good as another. We should not conduct work on crop improvement education without research results. We should not conduct policy education without research results.

Finally, we must ask why policy education is important to our audiences. Time is valuable to most people, and education must have a purpose. Will what they learn as a part of a policy education experience make a difference in how a decision is made?

In the past, our audiences have been largely made up of agricultural producers, supply and marketing firms with direct interest in agricultural production, and the general farm organizations. We have currently added community and state leaders who have responsibility for making decisions about local and state issues. We cannot direct our attention solely to these clientele groups in the future. If our educational program is going to have impact on the political decision process, then the educational program must also be directed toward consumers as well as the varied public interest and lobbying groups who spend a considerable amount of time and effort in legislative halls influencing the outcome of particular issues.