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PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION*

*John O. Dunbar, Associate Director
Indiana Cooperative Extension Service*

Public affairs education is becoming increasingly important due to mounting numbers of public problems created by rapid adoption of technology and changes in life styles, increasing amounts of scientific and technical information needed for each public affairs decision, and constant bombardment of the individual with bits and pieces of information on a multitude of public problems. Also, decisions with important consequences for the individual citizen are being made farther and farther away from him.

Human affairs become public affairs when the consequences of an act by an individual or group of people go beyond the person or persons directly engaged in it *and* when others try to influence these consequences. When consequences of an act are confined mainly to the person or group directly engaged in it, the act is a private affair. However, when consequences go beyond the persons directly engaged and other people try to inhibit some consequences or promote others, this becomes a public affair. The end result of a public affair is usually a public policy—a settled course of action adopted and followed by the public to achieve certain goals or consequences. Public policies are usually embodied in public laws, programs, or institutions.

Each citizen must practice, preserve, and protect the democratic process if he wishes to enjoy individual liberty and human dignity. He must decide for himself which technological, economic, social, and political developments are desirable or undesirable. Then, he must help create laws, institutions, and programs to achieve results that are desirable and avoid those that are not. Each citizen should vote, make his views known, and participate in public affairs activities.

Education in public affairs develops informed, interested, competent citizens capable of making sound judgments based upon objective facts, scientific principles, and logical thinking. Uninformed people are at the mercy of those who would tell them what to do.

Land-grant universities are a basic institution of democracy. They have helped achieve many scientific and technological advances from which have grown many public problems. They now have a moral obligation to develop research and education programs to help solve

*Summary of the report of the Cooperative Extension Service Task Force on Public Affairs Education.

these problems. To adequately meet this obligation will require resource commitment in many schools, colleges, and departments of the university.

FUNCTION OF THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

The function of the Cooperative Extension Service in public affairs education is to help people solve problems. To do this it should:

1. Bring together objective facts to help people analyze each issue. This is a primary function of both the university and the educator.
2. Develop viable alternative solutions for important problems.
3. Place information relevant to each problem in a decision-making framework.
4. Conduct educational programs to diffuse information among the people.
5. Organize interaction among individuals and groups concerned with the problem.

A primary goal of extension public affairs programs should be to develop people who can more effectively solve public problems. It should be clear that extension's function in public affairs is education, not policy determination. Extension's function is to better equip the people it serves to analyze issues on the basis of objective facts and scientific principles. It is the prerogative of the people themselves to make their own decisions, individually and collectively, on public affairs issues and to express them as they see fit.

Public affairs education programs should deal with important problems of concern to the people regardless of the nature of the problem. The reason for this is that consequences usually affect both urban and rural people. Likewise, the audience for public affairs education programs should be determined by their orientation to the problem, not by their occupation or whether they live in urban or rural areas.

Resources should be committed to each problem for a long enough time to permit a significant impact on its solution.

Public affairs programs cannot be postponed until all relevant facts are available. They must be forward looking and must provide analysis of probable consequences of alternative courses of action.

Major emphasis should be given to a problem at the most "teachable moment" of the public, after interest has developed but before the decision has been made.

THE PUBLIC PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS—PYRAMIDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Public problem solving is a process of pyramiding human behavior, individual and social, informal and formal, nonpolitical and political. It is a decision-making process conducted in the public eye, by representatives of the people, involving individuals and groups. It is also a problem-solving process which follows the outlines of scientific problem solving. Public affairs decisions are reached through compromise and consent and implemented by public laws, institutions, or programs. (Figure 1).

A person's behavior, hence his decisions, in public affairs is determined primarily by his values, beliefs, and impulses. Values are normative standards in the mind of the individual which influence his choice among goals and alternatives. Our system of beliefs is our perception of reality. Beliefs include facts which have been scientifically verified plus what people think are facts. Impulses are forces which influence man's action without regard to standards of propriety or consideration for reality.

The public affairs educator influences individual behavior by: (1) inviting people to consider verifiable facts, which may or may not conflict with the individual's conception of reality, and (2) providing estimates of probable effects of alternative courses of action based upon facts and logic.

APPROACHES, AUDIENCES, AND TECHNIQUES FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION

The problem-alternatives-consequences approach appears best suited for public affairs education. It includes:

1. Clarification of the problem.
2. Goal identification, i.e., what ought to be done to resolve the problem.
3. Development and analysis of alternative courses of action to achieve what ought to be done.
4. Analysis of the consequences, i.e., social, economic, and political costs and benefits to individuals and society, who pays the costs and who benefits.
5. Allowing the public to choose.

Potential public affairs audiences include:

1. People with a high degree of influence in reaching a solution, including legitimizers, key leaders, government officials, and leaders of private groups and organizations.

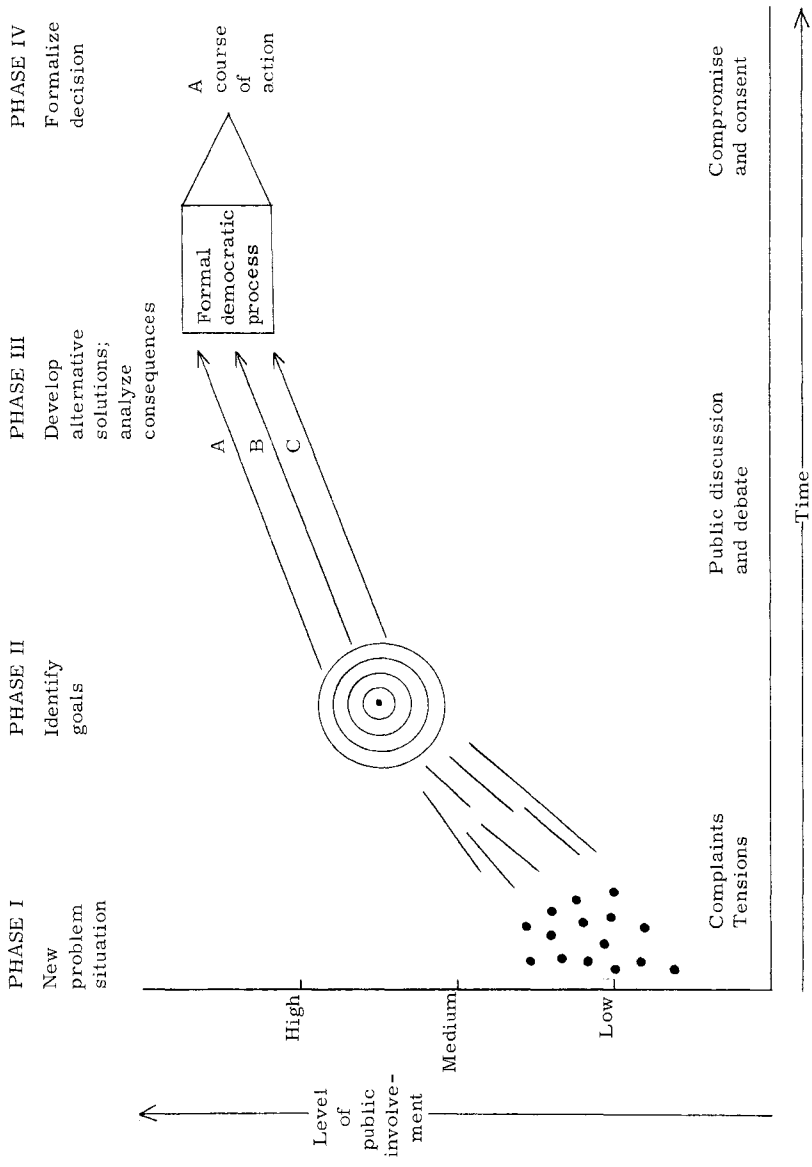


FIGURE 1. PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING, PROBLEM-SOLVING SEQUENCE

2. People significantly affected by the problem or proposed solution.
3. People interested in the common good.
4. The general public, many of whom may not be concerned.

Although teaching is still very much an art, there are some principles that can help guide the public affairs educator toward success in handling controversial issues. They include:

1. Organize learning so that there is sequence. The sequence for public affairs education is: (a) clarify the problem, (b) develop and explain alternative solutions, and (c) analyze the consequences of each alternative in terms of interest to the audience.
2. Relate what is being taught to the individual's interest, experience, and observation. Present each new fact, alternative, or consequence in terms familiar to the learner.
3. Stimulate the learner to react through dialogue between the teacher and the learner, discussion between the teacher and several learners, or group discussions.
4. Help provide the learner with satisfaction or dissatisfaction from his behavior. Bring together an audience from a wide enough geographic area that they do not already know how the others think, break them into small groups of twelve to fifteen people and ask them to discuss the issue and arrive at a consensus. Such discussions among peers are very effective.
5. Lead the learner through a logical process of analysis. Focus attention on a point he can perceive, then help him move from that point to another in logical fashion so that he can see relationships clearly.

The public affairs educator should use as many channels as possible for disseminating the information he has developed. His maximum effectiveness will be achieved through some optimum combination of the following:

1. Training sessions for co-workers.
2. Individual consultations with key leaders and other influentials.
3. In-depth discussions with small groups of highly concerned, responsible citizens.
4. Organizing group meetings in which people of different viewpoints can get better acquainted and share ideas.
5. Meetings for membership of various organized groups.

6. Training meetings for leaders.
7. Mass meetings for presentation of speeches, symposia, and forums.
8. Distribution of in-depth bulletins and leaflets.
9. Magazine articles and news stories.
10. Television and radio presentations.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROBLEMS ARE INTERDISCIPLINARY

The answer to a complex public problem is seldom found within the narrow confines of a single discipline. Public problems are not engineering or medical or nutritional or economic or psychological or sociological problems. Rather they are problems with engineering, medical, nutritional, economic, psychological, and sociological aspects. The set of disciplines required to provide knowledge for the solution of one problem may be entirely different from that required for the solution of another. For example, a school reorganization issue will require knowledge from sociology, public finance, economics, education, and law as a minimum. A water pollution issue will require information from biology, chemistry, engineering, and economics as a minimum.

If the public affairs educator is to synthesize crucial information into a problem-solving, decision-making framework for consideration by his audiences, he usually must get it from several disciplines. If he wishes to be very helpful to those responsible for solving problems, he cannot limit himself to the knowledge in one discipline alone. He will have to acquire a problem-oriented knowledge base.

The administrative structure to facilitate public affairs education has to be evolved to fit the structure of each university. A pattern that appears to be evolving is the assignment of full-time or part-time personnel to public affairs in several schools, colleges, and departments of the university.

Extension field personnel are in a unique position to get next to local people and interpret their needs. They can relay these needs to specialists and pull campus faculty into their area or county to provide important information to help people solve public problems. All staff members should be able to provide key facts and understanding needed by their clientele concerning public problems related to their area of competence.

STAFF COMPETENCIES AND TRAINING

The successful public affairs educator:

1. Is able to relate with people who are aware of public problems and want to do something about them.

2. Is able to identify and clarify emerging public problems.
3. Is competent in the subject matter related to his area of public affairs.
4. Can develop viable alternatives for solving public problems.
5. Knows how to mount an educational program on a public problem.
6. Is able to discern “the teachable moment” concerning a public issue.
7. Knows the goals, values, beliefs, and attitudes of various audiences.
8. Understands the role of education in solving public problems.
9. Understands democratic government, its principles and processes.
10. Understands group dynamics and principles of adult education.
11. Uses methods and techniques necessary to deal with controversy and conflict in public affairs education programs.
12. Possesses tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of others.
13. Is willing to accept the educator’s role, not be an advocator.
14. Is able to remain educational goal directed.
15. Has faith in people, i.e., believes that when they have the facts, they will make sound decisions.

Elements of an effective program for developing staff for public affairs work include:

1. Involve staff members in education on controversial issues so that they may “learn by doing.”
2. Provide them with knowledge of subject matter relevant to each problem.
3. Develop their ability to put relevant knowledge into a decision-making framework, i.e., problem-alternatives-consequences.
4. Develop attitudes and capability necessary for working with people involved in controversy.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS ACTIVE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The prime requisites for maintaining good relationships with other professional people interested in a controversial issue are accurate knowledge, objectivity, and equitable treatment of all individuals and groups. Professional ethics are as important in public affairs as in the medical or legal professions. The educator should provide the same information to

all individuals and groups. He should neither take sides nor usurp the role of the citizen in applying values, the legislator in making formal decisions, or the interest group leader in promoting policies. Nor should he assume the duties of the administrator of a program such as OEO, ASCS, Farmers Home Administration, etc.

On the positive side, the public affairs educator should take the initiative in keeping channels of communication open between himself and others interested in public affairs. He should involve nonextension staff in public affairs education activities and enlist the aid of nonuniversity people who have specialized knowledge relevant to a public affairs decision.

The public affairs educator who espouses a cause or promotes a program is almost sure to invoke the enmity of those who take opposing stands.

RESEARCH IS NEEDED

A broad, well-conceived research base is just as essential for carrying on a successful extension education program in public affairs as it is for any other extension activity. Solving our long list of urgent public problems will require facts produced by research in many departments of the university. Problems of harmful drugs and pesticides, crime, delinquency, low farm income, poverty, poor education, pollution, and many more simply cannot all be solved by research programs in the school of agriculture or any other single school of the university. If the land-grant university is to retain its high status as a "university of the people," its research arm will have to tackle such problems as these.