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## TARGETING ECONOMIC EDUCATION AUDIENCES

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As the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA) and the agricultural economics profession assess their involvement with economic education, targeting adult versus youth audiences is one area to examine. For the most part, agricultural economists target adult audiences with traditional agricultural economics subjects including management, marketing, finance, policy, trade, and price analysis. Agricultural economists define the adult audience very specifically within the agricultural production sector which is experiencing fewer and fewer participants. Focusing a larger portion of agricultural economists time on youth audiences can provide a broader cross-section of the population with a basic economic and agricultural literacy. Can we wait for the knowledge and decision skill payoff from targeting youth audiences? Or, do policy makers, administrators, institutions, and organizations demand that we target adult audiences in hopes of more immediate payoffs in the form of adult making wise decisions about microeconomic and macroeconomic questions? Which has the higher payoff... investing in youth education where presumably per unit payoffs are greater when they are eventually realized or investing in adult education with smaller but more immediate payoffs?

### **Economic and Agricultural Literacy**

To analyze the audience targeting issue, it is important to briefly define economic and agricultural literacy. Economic literacy seeks to improve the audience's understanding of decisions about the allocation of scarce resource in satisfying human wants. The Joint Council

on Economic Education recently named the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE) states--- "people need to understand enough economics to make reasoned judgements about economic questions." The result is people who are more effective decision makers and more responsible citizens. Personal, family, business, and community decisions as well as broader matters of economic policy are included in this ambitious competency goal. The National Council seeks this goal for high school graduates and focuses its economic literacy efforts on the kindergarten through twelfth grade students. The National Council operates under the premise that the more education in economics a teacher has, the greater the improvements in economic literacy achieved by students in the teacher's class. The National Council and its network of university affiliated-Centers for Economic Education focus on teacher training in economics.

For purposes of this discussion, agriculture is broadly defined to include production, distribution, and consumption of food, fiber, and forest products. Agricultural literacy or "an understanding of how agriculture works" has been championed by many people in these industries. Anecdotes about children who believe that milk comes from the grocery store not the cow accompany outcries to rally around agriculture literacy for young people. Advocates emphasize, "these young people must understand the importance of the agriculture industry" and thus imply "save" the industry and strengthen support for public policies favorable to the industry. If the industry requires "saving" then educators had better do a good job with economic and agricultural literacy. My skepticism comes with 17 years as an agricultural economist in the economic education profession and more recently as the father of a nine year old son. My son has seen cows and asked about them and has a basic understanding of milk

production, processing, distribution, and consumption. Although, I am not sure he is ready to explain milk marketing and pricing agreements.

The economic and agricultural literacy questions include where are agricultural examples best incorporated into a person's set of educational experiences (adult versus youth) and what competency levels are optimal (for example, 9 year olds not needing to understand milk marketing and pricing agreements). Agriculture offers many logical, interesting, and relevant examples to compliment a person's economic and agricultural literacy. These examples offer a foundation for AAEA and the agricultural economics profession to examine their role in the economic and agricultural education of the general population.

### **The Audiences**

For the most part, agricultural economists target adults with hopes of a relatively quick payoff when the adults use the knowledge in the operation of their firm, decisions in their community, or support of a public policy. Bite-sized chunks of economic and agricultural literacy, disguised in production-oriented sessions, have been presented to thousands of adults who in theory, and sometimes in practice, benefit from the bites. Agricultural economists are often frustrated when they find that adults who have participated in educational sessions continue making decisions which contradict optimal use of resources. Economic educators ask... to what extent has adult economic literacy among these participants improved?

Some agricultural economists implement economic education experiences for youth audiences. Primarily, these experiences are via Extension 4-H, FFA, USDA-Ag in the Classroom, Farm Bureau, Chicago Board of Trade, and commodity-oriented curricula. These curricula reach a limited percentage of the pre-college youth population. In many cases, they

overlap in reaching the same young people and seek non-economic agendas combined with an economic education thread.

Institutional tradition and ease of contact with farm, rural, production-oriented, 4-H, and/or FFA youth audiences guide many of the economic education efforts involving agricultural economists. With declining numbers of people in the agriculture production sector, fewer and fewer youths are available for these traditional programs. Meanwhile, the non-traditional majority of youths matriculate without the benefit of organized and targeted economic and agricultural literacy.

One goal of many agriculture-related organizations is to develop a cadre of young people interested in and knowledgeable of the food and fiber sector. Organizations hope that these youths will eventually be in employment and leadership positions where they might influence agricultural issues or policies. This scheme works, provided the targeted audience includes a portion of the smartest and brightest youths willing to provide their human capital to the agriculture industry. There is competition for these smartest and brightest youths. Evidence indicates that agriculture has difficulty in attracting these young people to the agriculture curricula in colleges and to careers in the industry. Increasingly, the agricultural industry goes outside the traditional agricultural institutions to recruit the best and brightest persons to their firms and organizations. Even the demand for the person with the agricultural background gives way to the demand for skills and knowledge.

### **The Payoff**

For agricultural economists, the question arises as to whether it is beneficial to expend the same amount of economic education time and energy on youth audiences with a slower,

longer, and potentially larger payoff period or adult audiences with a faster, shorter and smaller payoff period. Also, foregone income and time questions related to adults trying to increase their literacy skills need to be considered. With youths the foregone income (and possibly time) will be lower.

For youth audiences, generally more receptive to increasing knowledge and skills, the economic education payoff comes in the form of decisions over a longer period of time. The chances of the youth internalizing and applying knowledge and skills to hundreds of decisions is much more likely. The results of applying this knowledge and skill occurs over a longer period of time and is difficult to measure.

With adult audiences, they are much more likely to resist economic education efforts and less likely to use knowledge and skills for changes in their behavior. Adult audiences are more likely to have predetermined patterns about how economic decisions should be made. When adults adopt economic knowledge, the payoff is likely to be more immediate than with youths and the adoption is likely to result in faster more measurable results.

### **Targeting**

The agricultural economics profession is recognized for its economic knowledge and analysis. The AAEEA/NCEE partnership is an opportunity to explore what really works in the economic and agricultural literacy audience arenas. The audience choices involve traditional and non-traditional adults and youths. Given institutional and administrative expectations for economic education activities, it is unlikely that agricultural economists will choose one audience exclusively. Also, it is unlikely that they will choose to devote a significant amount of time to non-traditional adults from the general population. Based on the points identified in this

presentation, it is more likely for agricultural economists to target a mix of traditional adult audiences (what we have been doing), traditional youth audiences (what some have been doing), and non-traditional youth audiences (what we have not been doing).

Evidence suggests that agricultural economists may wish to redirect at least a portion of their efforts to youth audiences who may be more readily accepting of knowledge and applications inside and outside the industry. For the most part agricultural policies are formed in an arena where very few members of the public understand, or for that matter are aware of, the costs and benefits of the policies. Effective economic education, targeted at youths, provides a public that has a better understanding of policy issues and the associated benefits and costs. Is the agricultural industry ready to answer the questions presented by a more economically and agriculturally literate citizenry? To what extent will economically literate individuals and firms make better decisions regarding the use of resources and policies affecting agriculture?

### **A Change**

Dr. Bruce Beattie, 1991-92 AAEA President, has talked about the "shrinking pond of production agriculture" and the changes needed for the agricultural economics profession to better serve students, their employers, society, and our self interest as a profession. No longer can the agriculture industry depend *only* on the traditional production oriented agriculture support network. Current economic and agricultural literacy efforts by agricultural economists are a part of this network. Targeting non-traditional audiences can play an important role in broadening industry support to include processors, exporters, financial institutions, consumers, and business persons. With youth audiences, the questions still remain...



Can we wait for the payoff? and

Is the payoff greater than targeting adult audiences?

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