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PROCEEDINGS OF A SYMPOSIUM
ON
THE FUTURE ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS
and the
AAEA IN ECONOMIC EDUCATION



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PUBLIC POLICY AND ECONOMICS EDUCATION FOR AMERICA'S YOUTH

Walter J. Armbruster, Executive Director
Farm Foundation

Barrows has defined public policy education as focusing on public issues applying university-based knowledge and educating citizens for better informed decisions. Why should we, as agricultural economists, be concerned about linking public policy education with economics education for youth?

Youth, tomorrow's citizens, are being taught various perspectives on public policy issues. Recycling is good, use of chemicals is bad, and timber harvesting should cease, are examples of statements readily found in materials used to educate kindergarten through 12th grade students.

The Role of Public Policy Education

An informed citizenry will become more meaningfully involved in public policy issue discussion and ultimate decisions having economic impact on their lives and communities.

Public issues involve conflict or disagreement, are visible and perhaps newsworthy at the national, state or local levels. They thus provide an opportunity for educating youth about economics while evaluating policy alternatives.

Many of today's public policy issues involve subject matter that falls clearly within the purview of agricultural economists. Environmental, food safety and other consumer concerns, and interrelationships between macro-economic policies and agricultural and rural economic prosperity are examples.

Agricultural economists have a knowledge base relevant to the discussion of these topics. Public policy education, focusing on the economic aspects of public issues, provides agricultural

economists employed in publicly-supported institutions to demonstrate the relevance of their profession to citizens' concerns.

Snell and Infanger (p. 1362), after surveying extension specialists and agricultural economics department chairmen in thirteen southern states, concluded that "Macro-economic policies will likely have a major impact on agriculture and rural communities during the 1990s. Thus, extension's educational responsibility for macro policy education is clear: provide farmers, agribusinesses, and communities with an improved awareness and understanding of the impacts of macropolicies and policy making. The net result should be improved decision making and more effective participation in the policy process." By extending their argument, a similar rationale emerges for the involvement of agricultural economists in educating youth on the variety of public policy issues involving topics within our purview.

Reaching Youth with Public Policy Education

Assuming a commitment to conducting public policy education for youth, certain vehicles or organizations exist that could facilitate such education.

The Joint Council on Economic Education Network including the national office, 50 State Councils on Economic Education and the 271 Centers for Economic Education offer an opportunity to reach urban youth audiences (Reda-Wilson, p. 1372). These organizations provide a potential vehicle for application of practical agricultural economic knowledge to public policy issues.

Agriculture in the Classroom is a nationwide program designed to provide students and teachers with resource materials focusing on agriculture. Many of the subjects treated have

economic aspects or lend themselves to significant economic components, although most of the materials I have reviewed lack significant economic content.

4-H programs reach large numbers of youth in rural and urban settings, but the projects or topics addressed have a strong physical science, rather than social science or economic, content. They are generally couched in a proponent or "how to" approach rather than the public policy education framework which identifies issues, specifies alternatives, and analyzes the consequences of each in an economic reasoning framework. Many of the topics treated in 4-H programs have the potential for economic content. Alternatively, the 4-H network may provide an opportunity for focused economic education on current public policy issues through a properly targeted program. The challenge is to design economic content into curriculum for the various age levels within the 4-H programs, fitting economic concepts into topics of interest to youth.

The FFA reaches a large number of rural youth. Some continue on to college, but many will return to farming or agricultural jobs with little understanding of economics or public policy issues. Certainly those going into farming within one or a few years need a good understanding of the economic implications of various policies, both agricultural specific and those impacting agriculture, if they are to maintain economically viable farm operations. Those going into agricultural industries may well be working in situations involving potential public policy issues including environmental and consumer issues.

National scouts (girls and boys) reach large numbers of youth. These programs include elements related to agriculture and economics, but they generally lack public policy education content and an economic framework.

Cultivating Relationships with Delivery Organizations

To access the potential delivery organizations, a good deal of effort may be required.

At the national level, the American Agricultural Economics Association's (AAEA) Economic Education Committee could take the lead in working with the Joint Council on Economic Education, Agriculture in the Classroom, 4-H, FFA and scout organizations to create a receptive environment for public policy education incorporating economic analysis. National level organizations can be instrumental or even crucial in generating receptivity for state level adoption of public policy education programs. All these organizations operate through state and local levels, with coordinating and policy direction coming from state and federal levels.

State level councils or education curriculum committees have a good deal of control over program content for the schools and organizations. Agricultural economics departments could make contact with such state councils and curriculum committees offering the resources of individuals from the department, exploring common subject matter interests creating opportunities for public policy education incorporating economic analysis.

Individual agricultural economists can establish linkages with one interested contact at the state level who is capable of getting the economic analysis and public policy education approach incorporated into the curriculum or programs.

On campus, individual agricultural economists can explore the opportunities for working with extension 4-H specialists and vocational agricultural educators who are closely linked with FFA regarding curriculum or program content. Opportunities may exist for creating free-standing programs and educational materials for focusing on the economic implications of various policy issues. Alternatively, economic analysis of public policy issues could be

incorporated into existing programs. In either case, agricultural economists should explore in-service education possibilities with 4-H extension specialists, vocational agricultural teachers involved with FFA programs and urban educators interested in economic issues.

We should explore every avenue for entering public policy education materials into the curriculum and projects of youth programs. Opportunities and challenges for individual agricultural economists, agricultural economics departments and AAEEA exist. Innovative and energetic pursuit of these opportunities may offer great rewards in the form of better educated youth, more capable of analyzing and understanding the full ramifications of various public policy issues.

It is time to get on with the task.

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