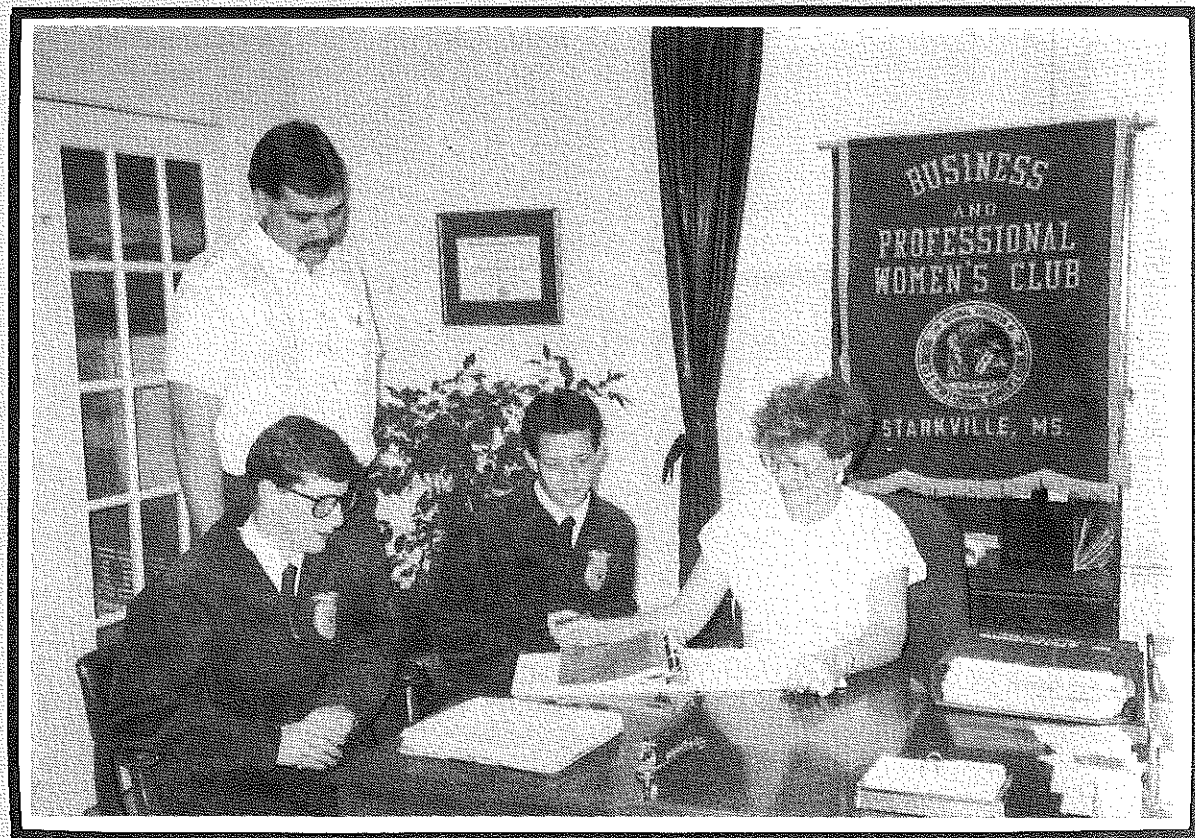


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**THEME: Enhancing School and
Community Relationships**

THE AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION MAGAZINE

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Articles and photographs should be submitted to the Editor, Regional Editors, or Special Editors. Items to be considered for publication should be submitted at least 90 days prior to the date of issue intended for the article or photograph. All submissions will be acknowledged by the Editor. No items are returned unless accompanied by a written request. Articles should be typed, double-spaced, and include information about the author(s). Two copies of articles should be submitted. A recent photograph should accompany an article unless one is on file with the Editor.

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Guessing vs. Assessing Community Needs

The agricultural education found in many communities is not what many studies say is needed. Too often, instruction is delivered yet we don't know or blatantly ignore a community's demographic composition. Thus, we deliver programs for a rural clientele that has Mom and Pop running a swine operation, a ranch, or a dairy farm while Junior waits to inherit the operation.

Numerous studies, however, say both Mom and Pop work off the farm (Dad's been doing it 15 years and farming part-time). Sadly, the parents will probably get divorced. Susie — Junior's teenage sister — might get pregnant before graduating from high school. She and Junior both take vocational agriculture. Susie plans to go to college. Junior wants to farm, but can't. Depressed, he attempts suicide while high on crack and beer. Luckily, Junior survives the nightmare, but is still puzzled about his future.

This scenario is contrived, but many say it mirrors reality. Urban, suburban, and rural communities now have similar ills and opportunities. All too often, however, we guess rather than assess what agricultural education these communities need. In this regard, three non-agriculturalist views of farming, school districts, and public schooling are presented to further show the nature of America's contemporary communities.

America's Farm Community

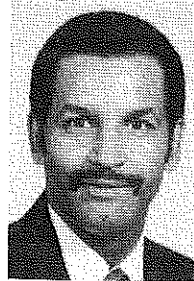
NBC Nightly News aired the first week of September a three-part documentary about America's farms. One point was that farmers are America's biggest welfare cases. The documentary said most USDA programs support wealthy farmers. A second point was there are too many farmers. In the 1930s, 26% of Americans farmed 1 billion acres; 3% now farm that 1 billion acres. The documentary also said biotechnology, genetic engineering, and conflicting federal programs guarantee surpluses as yields rise.

Large School Districts

Many retired vocational agriculture teachers, including mine, validly claimed they knew most residents in their school districts. How many of today's teachers make such claims? According to Chris Piphon (Kappan, September, 1987, p. 6), the U.S. had over 71,000 school districts in 1951; now there are 15,747. Large districts demolished most agricultural educators' concept of community. Riding a bus 27 miles one-way in 1970 told me school districts were larger. Teaching vocational agriculture in a senior high school with 1,500 students reiterated the point.

Americans and Public Schooling

Each September I await the Gallup Poll to see how Americans perceive their public schools. Phi Delta Kappa,



By Blannie E. Bowen, Editor

(Dr. Bowen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural Education at The Ohio State University.)

an excellent education fraternity, commissions the Gallup organization to do a national survey each year. Permit me to highlight a few findings (See the **Kappan**, September, 1987, p. 17-30, for more details).

What do Americans think of vocational education? For students planning to attend college, 31% said vocational training should be required. For students not planning to attend college, 78% said vocational training should be required. Vocational education is obviously perceived as optional for college-bound students.

What about a grade for public schools? Respondents living in communities under 2,500 graded public schools highest (53% gave them an A or B). Those in the central city gave the lowest grade (28% awarding A or B). Parents gave higher marks than nonparents (56% vs. 39% awarding A or B).

What does the public know about local schools? Not much. Only 15% said they were well-informed and 39% fairly well-informed. Almost identical percentages resulted when the sample was asked about (1) the advantages and disadvantages of local schools, and (2) what is being taught and what should or should not be taught. As expected, parents with children in local schools were more informed than nonparents. As birth rates decline, the non-parent or uninformed group will only increase.

So What?

Voters often make decisions based on perceived truths. Would Americans keep or dismantle vocational agriculture programs? I prefer informed voters who base decisions on "facts," including my version of "the facts." If you concur, then decisions about vocational agriculture can't be devoid of community input. A community's pulse must be properly assessed, not guessed. Authors writing in this issue focus on both assessing and informing the community to enhance relationships. Roland Peterson is to be congratulated for assembling authors to address this theme.

What Happened To Agricultural Education in Community Schools?

In his book on the concept of community schools, Hamlin (1949) stated that, "All agricultural education in the public secondary schools is conducted in and for communities." He wrote that, "Few, if any, of our schools in communities are community schools." If schools were not community based in an earlier day (the 1940s and 50s), what is the situation today? This question raises a host of questions and serves as a reminder that it is time for agricultural education to revisit the community school concept.

Are developments today driving schools further from this concept? Does the "excellence movement" fit with this concept? This movement seems to say the arts, language, mathematics, and science are areas which schools ought to focus all of their attention. Does the term community refer to the nation, a state, a region, or a local community? Does the term community refer to the academic and financially elite? Does *everyone* in the community fit the definition of a school's mission today? Obviously, Hamlin considered the whole community in his definition. He indicated that the school program is based on the needs of the whole community without regard to age, sex, race, religion, color, national origin, handicap, or veteran status.

Hamlin also pointed out that the local school district is the primary unit to perform educational functions. Any other arrangement allows the encroachment of larger units upon the local unit. Local control and the right to govern themselves has rested with people in a community. Clearly, in the United States, by a constitutional or legislative act, legal control over the schools is vested in the legislature of each state, which, in turn, delegates responsibilities to a state agency and to local districts. With a few exceptions, which the legislature and state agency retain, a large measure of decision making is entrusted to the local school district. The basic principle of who governs and controls is confused when county, state and federal governments, or other school districts assume educational responsibilities.

Today's Community Concept

Obviously, Hamlin's definition is debatable today as encroachments occur regularly. The local school district simply does not have enough student or financial resources to sustain a viable community education program. Consequently, other levels of government have entered the "community concept" arena and confusion prevails as Hamlin indicated would happen. Today, one is not certain what constitutes community and exactly what are the needs of a community. Since teachers of vocational



BY ROLAND L. PETERSON, THEME EDITOR
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agriculture are the "doctors of agricultural education" in a community, how they analyze the educational needs of youth, young farmers, established farmers, and agribusiness personnel (management, sales and support staff) in a community is vitally important.

Furthermore, the ability to determine the agricultural education needs of a community has become a more complicated process. In an earlier day, general observations and conversation with people often revealed a vast arena of educational needs. Today, the issues are more complex and involved. The agricultural needs in a community center on management issues, problem-solving, decision-making, and the development of thinking skills in dealing with major issues. The impact of sophisticated media gives agriculturalists access to factual information. Computers and various data sources ranging from video to print media all bombard the community with facts. However, the critical educational issues focus on how productive resources are managed and marketed. Where does the local school's agricultural education program fit within that arena? Once needs are identified, getting the agricultural community to participate in a program is another challenge. Articles in this issue outline new concepts in marketing educational programs based on knowing client needs and wants.

Hamlin advanced the idea that many schools seem to operate almost independently of the needs of their communities. State or national standards, college entrance requirements, and competency examinations tend to drive schools to ignore the community school concept of meeting the needs of all the people. Certainly, the preparation of people to live in other communities (state, national, world) is an important educational need. However, it is not the only need over which community schools should exercise concern. Schools exist for meeting the needs of all the people in a community. The community concept should exist to help a school find and develop its natural and human resources.

It is refreshing to see the local community Director of Economic Development at Staples, Minnesota, employed and officed in the local school district. It would have to be said, Staples has a community school concept! Hamlin pointed out that schools devoted in part to studying and solving community problems could pay much of their own way. Persons et.al. (1968) found that an investment in farm management education paid the community a sizeable return on every dollar spent. Hamlin also stated that the only reason for having a school is to affect life outside of school. People in the community know best if this is really being accomplished. If the community is to share in the outcome of the school, it is reasonable to have it share in the development of the objectives and programs. The frustration comes in that schools have slipped into the concept that schooling must be subject-centered and students must conform regardless of personal interests, abilities, needs, motivation, capacities, talents, and aspirations. It is clear that all the lessons learned about values of a student-centered curriculum are currently being ignored. Obviously, schooling isn't all student-centered nor is it all subject-centered. It is a balance. Feldman (1984) indicated that vocational education has been ambushed by the excellence movement. The community school concept appears to be a part of the same ambush.

The community and student-centered concept has been a strong aspect of agricultural education. In agricultural education, the need to determine what should be taught must be jointly determined by the teachers and the community. Providing agricultural education for the 1990s and beyond places a burden on the school to offer an appropriate education using appropriate physical facilities and people resources. Consequently, schools must use the entire community to develop a program of excellence. Is the program of vocational agriculture really centered on the needs of a community? Do textbooks and statewide curriculum plans guide instruction? Are the state curriculum plans developed around the needs of the agribusiness industry? In striving for excellence, agricultural education too may become subject-centered in its focus.

Evidence seems to indicate that the community school concept developed by Hamlin decades ago is being ignored by decision-makers who influence and plan education (even agricultural education). However, a revisitation of Hamlin's work quickly reveals numerous principles and ideas that are as appropriate for the 1990s as they were for the 1940s and 1950s. If programs in agricultural education are to be successful, more community involvement must become part of the plan. Articles in this issue focus on the topic of enhancing school and community relationships. The topic is of major significance to educators in agricultural education at the secondary, post-secondary, and adult levels. The typical pattern today is to ignore the community and associate education with an illusive movement that seems to be based on who is best (or excellent) in the world in terms of science, art, mathematics, and technology (whatever that means).

The needs and wants of people in agriculture appear to be of little importance as college and university entrance standards establish the agenda for all of education. It would do agricultural education well to revisit the writings

of Hamlin and once again become sensitive to principles of the community school concept. "Community" may have a more broadly based definition today, but there is a "community" which is served by every program.

Assess Community Needs

The use of new tools and concepts for determining needs in communities are available to provide this sensitivity. Focus group interviews have been used and continue to be used by the business world as a means of determining the consumers' reactions to new products or businesses. Vocational educators have been strong advocates of using citizen advisory groups. However, citizen advisory groups may not be the final answer in determining community needs. It may be that the focus group interview is capable of identifying the real issues needed to bring programs in line with student and community needs. What happened to agricultural education in community schools? It is apparent that Herbert Hamlin's community school concepts are not so obsolete but may have been forgotten by agricultural educators at all levels of schooling.

In summary, the question of what happened to the role of the community in agricultural education is best answered by recognizing that Herbert Hamlin's concepts are not so obsolete, merely forgotten by agricultural educators at all levels of schooling.

The articles in this issue serve as reminders of the value of enhancing community relationships. Hopefully, the authors clarify our vision in relating programs to the real needs of a community.

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About the Cover

Enhance community relationships by planning activities with other groups. Determine what other groups are doing and get involved. The community as a whole will benefit from such cooperation. (Photo courtesy of Jacque Deeds of Mississippi State University).

Building Linkages: Education-Business-Industry

A program of agricultural education that does not have a positive and close working relationship with the community in which it is located will not and can not expect to survive. Agricultural education gets its life from the community it serves.

If we believe that the study of agriculture is by nature experiential, then where else but the community are students to get the practical experience that has long been at the heart of agricultural education? To be sure, much of the foundation for practical experience should be provided at the school, but true education in agriculture can only happen in the real world.

The first "real world" for our students happens to be the communities in which they live. Of course, teachers have an obligation to go beyond the local community and expose students to the other real worlds, i.e. - regional, national, and global communities. We must look beyond our own communities if we are to understand agriculture and adapt to the many changes that are occurring.

However, we must start the process locally. That is where all education must start. The local school and its community are where the appreciation for work begins. The place of work in each person's life begins at home, in school, and in the community with its business and industry. What can teachers of agriculture do to build linkages between the school and the community? The answer to this question can be found in three basic areas of influence — PEOPLE - PUBLIC RELATIONS - PUBLICITY.

People-Data-Things

Because teachers of agriculture are responsible for such a variety of course content, it is not possible for each teacher to know everything or have every resource or reference available at the school. For some teachers, this situation is hopeless, but for many, it is an opportunity. What better reason is there to get in touch with the community, at large, than to express a need for help and materials. Many teachers have become so accustomed to purchasing the latest textbook or instructional materials or waiting for the new university-developed handbook to be delivered that they have all but forgotten the community resources at their fingertips.

One may ask how this need for resources builds linkages and positive community - school relationships. It may or may not be obvious, depending on the community, but people, by and large, are willing to help the school when there is a real need. Generally, people are very willing to assist the school in any way they can, especially the school that has their children in it.



By ROBERT A. MARTIN

(Dr. Martin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Education at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.)

The key questions every teacher must ask are:

Who are the key people in the community who can serve as resource persons for selected units of instruction?

What types of community information and data are available to the agriculture teacher?

What are the industries, businesses, and agencies that can provide realism for teaching agriculture?

In searching the community for resources to use in teaching agriculture, the teacher *informs* the public, *unites* people for the purpose of education, and *builds* a consensus of support for the instructional program. The teacher is

Figure 1: Suggestions to Build a Strong Public Relations Program

1. Use an active advisory committee. Give the committee something to do. Seek committee member involvement. Do more than just have a meeting.
2. Conduct a resource assessment of the local community. Involve the advisory committee, alumni association, and students in compiling an inventory of resources that may be useful in teaching various units.
3. Develop mini-grant proposals to fund needed instructional materials. Contact local civic and service clubs and present written proposals to request funds for instructional materials and equipment.
4. Develop economic development projects wherein students operate a business with guidance and support from community organizations and leaders.
5. Involve every student in at least one agricultural experience in the community. Carefully supervise and evaluate the experience.

visible in the community and he/she is using local resources and experiences to help students learn.

Public Relations / Publicity

Public relations is much more than mere publicity. Publicity is important and the vocational program in agriculture deserves as much publicity as it can get. However, good public relations goes far beyond reporting events, announcing activities, and recognizing student achievement.

Good public relations is built on involvement of the school's agriculture program in the community and the community's involvement in the instructional program of the agriculture curriculum. Some key points to help build strong public relations are shown in Figure 1.

The secret to good public relations is involvement. The more people a teacher of agriculture gets involved in the agriculture program the more likely the community will support the program. Success breeds success.

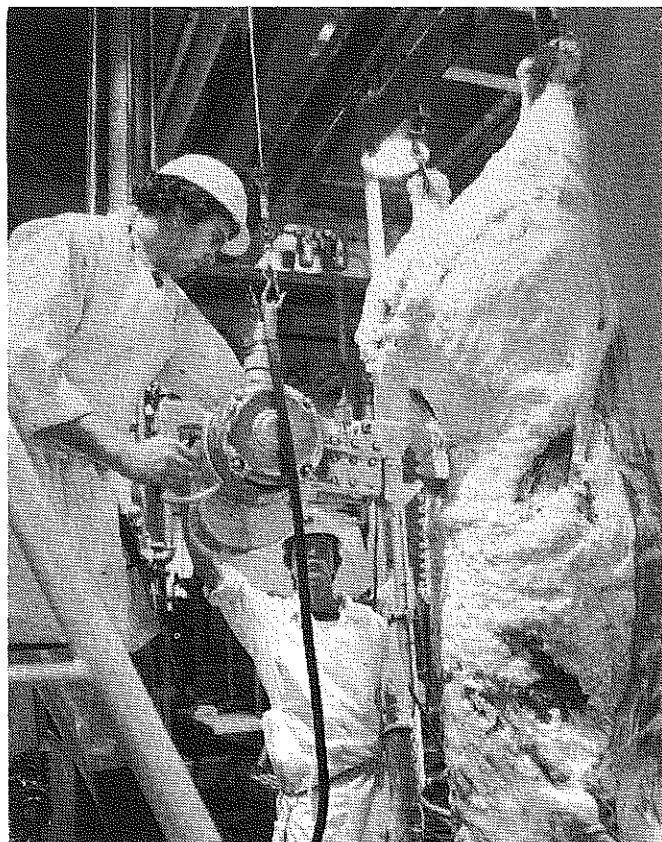
Publicity - The Capstone

Good publicity programs capture the highlights of a vocational education program in agriculture. Emphasis is placed on using every available media outlet including newspapers, television, radio, and magazines. The wise teacher of agriculture will carefully plan his/her publicity program to capitalize on every aspect of the agriculture program. Too often the publicity program is focused entirely upon the FFA Chapter and its many activities. If the public only sees and hears about the FFA Chapter and its activities, the public may infer that the program is only FFA activity oriented. What the public sees may be all that is understood. Even that portion could be misunderstood.

Teachers of agriculture should put equal emphasis on publicizing the "work" of students. Every student should have some agricultural experience in the community. Why not publicize this information by placing pictures and short stories about these experiences in local newspapers and on radio and TV? The general public needs to understand that competencies far beyond those taught through FFA are also a part of vocational and career education in agriculture. As much emphasis on publicity should be placed on the instructional program as is placed on FFA activities.

Summary

The key element underlying the issue of enhancing school and community relations is that an uninformed public is an "against" public. A well informed and involved public is made up of people willing to support the instructional program of agricultural education. Information and involvement are powerful tools that teachers of agriculture must use to meet the demands of a dynamic agricultural industry and the educated personnel it requires.



Linking education, business, and industry includes providing work experience in the real world as in this meat processing plant. Student work experience provides one of the strongest links between education, business, and industry. (Photo by Robert A. Martin, Iowa State University).



Adult leaders solving local problems provide a source of community support for education. People helping people is the essence of agricultural education. (Photo by Robert A. Martin, Iowa State University).

Student Activities Through Community Involvement

A common topic of discussion among teachers of vocational agriculture is how to expand lines of communication between the school and the public. When reaching out to the public, we need to establish our goal and how we plan to achieve it. Are we reaching prospective students, seeking potential employment sites for students involved in Supervised Occupational Experience programs, attracting local business leaders willing to serve on the advisory committee, and establishing relationships with industry to help secure financial assistance for our programs? These are reasons for establishing lines of communication. All are positive factors to consider for improving communication, but one other factor should be considered. How will the students benefit? How do we involve our most valuable asset, our students, and use them to strengthen our relationships between the school and the community?

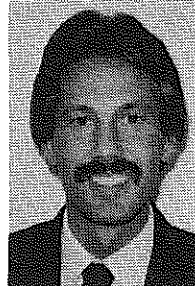
Hopefully, we all feel positive about the idea of having our students participate in community "improvement" projects as a way of building better relationships. This is an excellent start, but what do the students gain? Also, what types of community projects provide our students the most learning?

A Mini-Grant

Permit me to introduce a success story that enhanced our school - community relationship. At Penta County Joint Vocational School, we are fortunate to have one of the many Career Consumer Programs of Ohio housed at our school. This program is funded under Vocational and Career Education in Ohio. I applied for a mini-grant through our Career Consumer Program to fund our community project. These grants cover any materials used in educating the public or community. You can get the necessary information from your local Career Consumer Program. Once I received the grant, I looked at what my students could offer the public. After many hours of deliberation, I asked myself, Why not let my students go out and teach? This sounded like it could be rewarding to both my students and the public. Why not let my students teach others about the things they learned in class and from their SOE programs?

Our Project

The next step was to discuss this idea with my students. I was overjoyed to see their excitement in this program. We immediately began planning that same day. The students decided to teach elementary school children. They chose the title of *Mini-Lessons*. The students divided into three groups and each group chose a different area to teach. The students knew that they would use the knowledge gained from class and their SOE programs as a basis for teaching each of the areas.



BY RONALD FEAR

(Mr. Fear is a Vocational Horticulture Teacher at Penta County Vocational School, 30095 Oregon Road, Perrysburg, Ohio 43551.)

For example, one group taught a lesson on the basics of floral design and then coached the students to make an arrangement to take home. The students teaching this lesson had gained the experience from their SOE program in a local flower shop. The next group taught 'why we need plants' and then conducted an activity on planting a small cutting. These students gained their experience from the school lab and their SOE programs in a local greenhouse. The last group's activity was geared to how landscaping makes our environment so beautiful. Each student learned how to pot small pine seedlings and care for them when they take them home to plant outdoors. All materials were covered by our mini-grant and my students reached over 600 students in 10 of our 16 school districts.

The Rewards

This activity was very rewarding and made a positive impact on our community. We put a positive foot forward about vocational education. The students, our administration, and I were all thrilled and proud to see our project recognized in the local newspaper and the *National Future Farmer* magazine. We were grateful for the many notes of appreciation from teachers and parents of the elementary students my students taught.

The rewards from the activities were many. Teaching the younger students and having them look up to them as adults raised the self-esteem of the vocational students and made them more aware of their responsibilities to society. It also showed them how valuable the knowledge was that they had gained from their SOE programs. In watching the interaction and seeing the older students teach the younger students, this gave me an added reward. Having the Penta County students participating in an activity outside the school helped strengthen the link between the community and its vocational school.

As you look back on activities you have done to improve the link between your school and the community, I hope you look carefully on the benefits your students will receive along with the benefits to the community.

Principles of Focus Group Interviewing

Think about fog. Think back to that morning when the fog was so thick that vision was measured in feet and not miles. When you went outside, you found the air cool and moist. Unfortunately the fog had disadvantages; vision was restricted and drivers slowed down on their way to work. Later in the day, the warmth of the sun cleared up the fog and once again vision was restored.

Educators and administrators face another kind of fog. The pressures of teaching, the demands on our time, and the need to master the details of the job tend to limit our vision. We get caught up in routines that limit our thinking about larger issues. As a result, we often make decisions based on previous experience. In some situations, these experiences serve us well, but when the environment is dynamic and circumstances change, the old experiences may actually restrict our ability to develop new solutions.

Fortunately, there are ways that may help clear up the fog. One of these ways is an evaluation tool or more precisely, a market research tool called the focus group interview. Businesses use focus group interviews to determine potential customer response to their products. The procedure is often used on new products prior to mass production. Features of the product which are particularly appealing to the customers are often highlighted in later promotion and advertising efforts. The less desirable aspects of the product are subjected to elimination or reduction. The technique yields new insights as to why consumers make certain purchasing decisions. For example, people drink soft drinks for reasons other than thirst and a craving for sweets. Focus group interviews revealed that socialization and escape were important considerations in drinking these beverages. It's no accident that soft drink manufacturers promote the sociability and escape aspects of their products. These decisions on promotion are often tied to findings obtained in focus group interviews. Over the years, the focus group interview procedure has gained considerable popularity in the private sector, primarily because it provides a low cost reading of participants' attitudes, feelings, and thoughts.

Focus group interviews are organized group discussions focused around a single theme. The technique evolved out of group interviews led by psychiatrists and psychologists which were conducted for people sharing common problems. In the early 50s, the private sector began to adopt and refine the procedures for use in market research.

A typical focus group study is really a series of group interviews — usually a minimum of three different groups with each group consisting of 5 to 10 people. Each group is comprised of people with similar characteristics and the questions are consistent across all groups. The moderator/



By RICHARD A. KRUEGER

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discussion leader introduces the topic of concern and then follows a predetermined questioning route. The group discusses the questions and shares insights and ideas. The moderator is careful to probe and seek additional clarification of responses relating to the questioning route. Each group interview usually lasts less than two hours.

The group interview process works well because it taps into the key aspects of individual decision-making and the dynamics of the group process. People usually do not make decisions in isolation, but rather after listening, discussing, and sharing concerns with others. Individual interview procedures that capture isolated responses may not reflect the dynamic real-life process most people encounter when making decisions. In settings where individual responses are sought, people tend to respond in a socially acceptable and polite manner. Evidence suggests that this is less true in a group interview environment.

Focus group interviews are sharply different from other group experiences encountered by educators such as planning committees, task forces, and advisory groups. Focus group interviews are a means of obtaining information and the function of the group is to provide that information; not to plan, advise, or vote. Emphasis is not on consensus but on the diversity and range of opinions of individuals within the group. To accomplish this task, several elements are essential, including: careful selection of participants, development and pilot testing of interview questions, and a skillful moderator.

Determine the Questioning Route

The interview questions (or questioning route) are a critical ingredient of focus groups. Pay attention to wording of individual questions and the sequence of those questions. Focus questions so that they are directed to topics on issues, opportunities, or situations of particular concern. Focus group interviews focus on specific programs, products, or concerns of clientele. A questioning

(Continued on page 10)

Principles of Focus Group Interviewing

(Continued from page 9)

route is established that follows a natural sequence of questions. Occasionally in practice the route is changed; questions are not necessarily followed in a lockstep manner but at that natural time when respondents are ready for the issue. Try to achieve spontaneity. Typically, the session begins with an overview of the ground rules, a description of why the session is being conducted, and an opening question that each person can answer to get people talking.

Selecting the Participants

Participant selection requires thought and planning. Individuals are selected because they possess certain social, economic, educational, or demographic characteristics. Attention is usually placed on obtaining a relatively homogeneous group such as dairy farmers who milk between 30 and 50 cattle. Determine the audience you are interested in and recruit participants based on the identified characteristics.

Audience selection is of particular concern to nonprofit organizations where services are to be targeted to certain audiences. In actual practice, information and services tend to be presented in a shotgun approach to the entire population or to the wrong audience because of inadequate attention to program promotion. For example, fairly often agricultural instructors are interested in reaching new clientele; those who have not participated in past educational opportunities. Conventional methods usually consist of asking the users why nonusers are not involved. This procedure can have some value, but more often than not will simply reinforce current status quo methods and marketing. Focus group procedures would call for a series of interviews with homogeneous groups of nonparticipants. An agricultural instructor might want to reach new audiences with agricultural programs and conduct a series of focus group interviews with nonparticipating farmers. In this situation, it might be of greatest value to divide the farmers into several groups by size or type of farming operation and then conduct a series of group interviews with each group of nonusers.

The Need for Skillful Moderators

Much of the effectiveness of focus group interviews depends on the skills of the moderator. The skillful moderator makes the group feel comfortable, relaxed, and creates a thoughtful permissive atmosphere. Encouragement is given to respondents to provide answers that are complete to achieve the most accurate description of their viewpoints. Skillful moderators know when to probe for greater depth of response and when to move on to the next category of questions. In addition, the moderator should have an adequate background knowledge of the topic being discussed. The primary task of the moderator is to draw out the perceptions and opinions of all participants without undue influence from dominant individuals. The



Focus group interviews are tape recorded to capture the exact comments of each participant. Remote microphones placed in the center of the table improve the clarity of the tape recording (Photo courtesy of the author).

goal is to achieve the friendly, informal atmosphere that is a delicate balance between being people oriented and task oriented.

Analysis of the Focus Group Session

Focus group discussions are typically tape recorded. The need for tape recording is explained to the participants at the beginning of the session. The recordings are often transcribed and the written manuscript is used for later analysis. The core of the analysis is in identifying the themes and patterns across the series of focus group interviews.

Some Examples

The Division of Agricultural Education at the University of Minnesota was concerned about its declining enrollment of rural youth. High school graduates from small rural Minnesota schools were enrolling in agricultural colleges in neighboring states. A series of focus group interviews with potential students revealed that the young people had definite notions about the University, and in fact the University was unwittingly adding to the erroneous perceptions. Students from small rural high schools saw the University of Minnesota as too big and too impersonal. They felt that they would get lost in the thousands of students and therefore preferred smaller schools.

With this insight, the faculty in the Division of Agricultural Education took another look at the promotional materials being distributed to prospective students. The descriptive brochures had grand pictures of the University — pictures of the campus mall with thousands of students and pictures of students in a library with countless books. The brochures told of the millions of books in the library, the thousands of students in the University, and the scores and scores of departments and majors. Clearly, the existing promotional materials reinforced fears of potential students. As a result of focus group research, faculty members designed a special brochure that emphasized the "more compact" St. Paul Campus, "friendly teachers who take an interest in you" and the benefits of attending college with other students from rural communities (Casey, Leske, & Krueger, 1987).

Focus groups have provided valuable background information prior to mail-out surveys. The Minnesota Extension Service commissioned an evaluation of the farm credit

mediation program and the research team planned a large scale mail-out survey of farmers, creditors, volunteer mediators, and county Extension agents. The research team needed to obtain information that was both complex and sensitive. Some of the farmers included in the survey were on the verge of bankruptcy or foreclosure and were attempting to reach mediated settlements that would save family farms. By using individual interviews and small group discussions in advance of the mail-out survey, the research team was able to (1) develop questions that would be consistently understood by various audiences and (2) also develop successful survey procedures (Krueger, Mueller, & Casey, 1986).

In the past few years, we have conducted focus group interviews on a range of topics with a variety of audiences, including farmers, community leaders, volunteers, teens, women employed outside the home, teachers, physicians, and architects, to name a few. In each situation, the moderators were pleased with the breadth and quality of information resulting from the interviews.

Summary

Our experiences would underscore the value of the focus group interview. It is relatively low cost. It yields valuable insights of participant responses to current or potential programs. It can be used with successful results even when staff have limited group interviewing skills. Most importantly,



The focus group moderator establishes a relaxed and permissive environment. Refreshments are often served before or during a focus group. (Photo courtesy of the author).

it helps remove the fog within our working environment and thereby enhances our vision.

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THEME

Listening to the Community . . . Using the Focus Group Interview Technique

As post-secondary and adult agriculture instructors plan programs and courses to meet the needs of farmers and agribusiness personnel in their communities, they must determine the perceptions of these groups to continuing agricultural education in addition to determining their specific educational needs. In essence, they need to listen to the community.

An effective technique to accomplish this goal is the focus group interview. Focus group interviews are meetings of small groups of people, randomly selected, with certain interests in common. Normally, a focus group will consist of 8-12 people. The interview lasts about one and a half to two hours. During the interview, participants discuss topics presented by a moderator (who, ideally, is someone unknown to the participants). The goal of a focus group interview is to obtain information that is truly reflective of the participants' feelings and perceptions. Because of group dynamics involved in focus group interviews, information becomes available that might not have



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emerged with conventional data collection methods. The ability to discover hidden data is a primary advantage of the focus group interview technique. In market research, focus groups are used to discover consumer preferences for new or existing products and have become a mainstay of this type of research because of the insight and depth of information they provide (Krueger, 1986).

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Listening to the Community . . . Using The Focus Group Interview Technique

(Continued from page 11)



Participants find focus groups enjoyable due to the informality. Occasionally participants want to stay after the group adjourns to continue the discussion. (Photo courtesy of Richard Krueger of the University of Minnesota).

While focus group interviews have been used extensively by many businesses to listen to their customers, educational institutions have typically relied on surveys and questionnaires to gather such information from local communities. On the contrary, marketing researchers do not downplay the role of surveys and questionnaires as important data gathering instruments. Experience, however, has shown them that other methods are needed in addition to surveys and questionnaires to really listen to customers. Sometimes citizen advisory committees only react to ideas or tell what we like or want to hear. Focus group interviews seem to get at that "real" information needed to guide program planning.

With post-secondary and adult agricultural education programs striving to market offerings to farmers and agribusiness personnel in an increasingly competitive environment, it seems appropriate to seriously consider the use of techniques such as the focus group interview to listen to groups in local communities. Developing a comprehensive process for listening to the community will enable agricultural educators to answer the following question appropriately. Do we really know the needs of our community and offer programming based on these needs or do we offer programming based on what *we* think the community needs?

The Minnesota Project

Recently, a project conducted by the Division of Agricultural Education at the University of Minnesota for the Minnesota State Board of Vocational Technical Education (Peterson and Migler, 1987) sought to increase enrollment in Minnesota's technical institute post-secondary agricultural programs by restructuring existing curriculum to make courses more accessible to farmers and agribusiness personnel. In the first year of the project, a needs assessment questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of farmers and agribusinesses within the service area of four participating technical institutes. After a major media blitz

using attractive brochures and newspaper, television, and radio advertising, courses that met needs identified by these groups were restructured and scheduled based on data collected with the questionnaires. Although farmers and agribusiness personnel did enroll in the restructured courses, the increase in enrollment was disappointing in view of the large numbers of persons who indicated that they would attend the courses if they were offered.

In the second year of the project, the restructuring effort was extended to eight additional technical institutes. However, in addition to the random sample survey, 15 focus group interviews were conducted to determine why farmers and agribusiness personnel did not enroll in courses when they indicated on the surveys that they would.

The interviews yielded information not obtained with the questionnaires. For example, it was determined that brochures and other traditional advertising methods were not very effective compared with being encouraged to attend by a significant person such as a veterinarian, farm management instructor, feed salesperson, or financial advisor. Focus group participants also indicated that they were not interested in attending courses taught "out of a book." They wanted a chance to provide input into course content and structure. Participants also noted that courses lasting more than 10 hours were probably too long. The following quotes (taken directly from the technical institute focus group interviews) are examples of how individuals express opinions in a focus group:

"If you send brochures or publicity in the mail, it goes into the wastebasket."

"Get away from the traditional approach to teaching. I'd be willing to share ideas I've learned in my business."

"Personally, I've been to too many lengthy, overly long meetings in the last two and a half to three years and about a year ago I decided I'm not going to any more meetings."

"The whole key is the subject matter that you are really interested in . . . and then being able to pick a time or pick as much or as little as you want out of it."

"The biggest thing we're lacking in probably any community is (agricultural commodity) marketing."

"I see my husband going to more of these things when he knows a neighbor is going with . . ."

"Show us how much we could benefit by taking a course."

"If the vet said go (to a course), I'd probably go."

"The reason that some of these programs probably haven't worked out so well in the last year or two . . . (is the) negative feeling in the country."

Based on the information collected from the focus group interviews in this study, a number of recommendations were made to the technical institute agriculture programs. While these recommendations were developed specifically

for Minnesota Technical Institutes, it is likely that many would be applicable for post-secondary and adult agriculture programs in other states.

The Recommendations

A major recommendation was to use personal contact of some type to reach farmers and agribusiness personnel rather than traditional advertising methods. Agribusiness managers seemed to agree that a personal visit from the instructor would be most effective in getting them or their employees to attend. Farmers noted that being encouraged by significant persons such as veterinarians, adult farm management instructors, lenders, or feed salespersons to attend a course would be very effective in getting them to enroll. In marketing courses, the financial benefits to be gained by the participants need to be stressed.

It was also recommended that instructors be very sensitive to the needs of farmers and agribusiness personnel when designing courses. Both groups expressed a strong desire to have input into this process. Classes should not be strictly lecture. There needs to be an opportunity for discussion during regular class sessions. Course delivery should be very flexible so enrollees can take only the parts they really want.

Recommendations for course scheduling and structure suggested the preferred time of day, preferred months, and number of hours or meetings for classes. Late mornings and early afternoons are the best times for most farmers. In areas with many livestock farmers, evening sessions will probably work best. Agribusiness managers prefer early mornings because there is less business activity at that time and there are fewer disruptions for them and their employees.

January, February, and March are the best months to offer courses for farmers and agribusiness personnel. Classes should meet as few times per week as possible. Generally, meetings of once or twice per week are preferred for farmers. Agribusiness personnel may want courses conducted over a period of consecutive days in intensive sessions to minimize extended disruptions to the business. Generally, courses should not exceed 10 to 12 hours in length. If necessary, longer courses should be restructured into a number of shorter courses.

A final recommendation was that agriculture department staffs do more to increase their visibility in local communities. They are generally not very well known. They



Focus group participants are sometimes asked to examine written descriptions of potential programs and then to share reactions to those plans. (Photo courtesy of Richard Krueger of the University of Minnesota).

should promote their programs by attending more activities where large numbers of farmers or agribusiness personnel also attend.

The information and recommendations gleaned from the focus group interviews have been tested by several technical institute agriculture programs in Minnesota. Results to date suggest that the use of personal contact by instructors and significant others is very effective. Courses that were designed to meet current needs have been successful (e.g., Alternative Enterprises, PIK Program, ASCS Sign-up). Recent experience has also shown that farmers prefer meeting as few times per week as possible when taking courses from a technical institute. While the recommendations must be implemented further, it appears that the data collected from the focus group interviews are very useable and can definitely help post-secondary and adult agriculture instructors better market and structure courses for farmers and agribusiness personnel.

The results of this project and other studies conducted by the Department of Vocational and Technical Education at the University of Minnesota suggest that focus group interviews can help post-secondary and adult agriculture instructors listen more effectively to their communities.

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NEW PRODUCT

Career guidance programs provide comprehensive, individualized services to students. Evaluation of these programs includes statements of desired student outcomes, methods of documenting the nature and extent of guidance interventions received by individual students, and criteria for quality career guidance programs.

A new publication, *Evaluation of Career Guidance Programs: Models, Methods, and Microcomputers*, by John O. Crites, reviews the status of

career guidance evaluation and suggests developmental work needed to support effective guidance programs.

At the time of publication, Crites was professor in The School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, and director of the Career Assessment Clinic.

Order *Evaluation of Career Guidance Programs: Models, Methods, and Microcomputers* (IN317—\$4.75), 32 pp., 1987, from the National Center for Research in Voca-

tional Education, The Ohio State University, Publications Office, Box N, 1960 Kenny Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210-1090; or call toll free 1-800/848-4815 or 614/486-3655 inside Ohio and outside the continental United States.

The development of this publication was sponsored by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education.

Enhancing Community Relations Through Public Relations

A community is defined as people living in a particular place linked by a common interest. A well planned and implemented public relations program can link the vocational agriculture program and the community. Community relations, like a good roof, should be constructed during the clear skies of cooperation and not assembled during the storms of challenge.

Sharing information with others can provide insight and direction. By sharing the information about vocational agriculture with others who are willing to listen but not directly related to the program, community relationships can be enhanced.

Enhancing community relationships is another way of saying, "developing good public relations within the community." Public relations include those activities undertaken by an organization to promote a favorable relationship with the public. It sounds simple enough in theory, but in practice requires time and careful planning just like all segments of the vocational agriculture program.

When it comes to enhancing community relationships, several questions can be asked: Why do it? What will it cost? How should it be accomplished? What benefits will the effort gain?

Why Enhance Community Relations?

The first and probably most important reason is to develop favorable impressions with influential people and organizations who are not directly related to agriculture. This concept is not to play down the importance of advisory (craft) committees and an active FFA Alumni chapter, but to stress the importance of sharing the program with those who can be of assistance and provide support without having a vested interest.

The second reason is to assure that positive community relations exist. It cannot be assumed that the community knows about the vocational agriculture program and all its varied components. The community may recognize the FFA Organization but not understand the role of the Organization in the total program of vocational agriculture.

Linking what is done in the vocational agriculture program to the community is the third reason for developing good community relations. A public relations program built around program goals and objectives that stress practicality and basic skills development can do much to gain community support for the program.



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The fourth reason to enhance community relations is to give something back to the community. Schools and youth organizations are often accused of taking without giving back. Businesses and organizations are frequently asked for donations for awards, door prizes for banquets, and buyers for livestock auctions. Yet they get very little back except an occasional thank you note or a line on a banquet program. Two-way communication is best and could result in strong working relationships.

What Does Good PR Cost?

A good public relations program costs little in actual dollars but in the beginning may require time and energy for planning and implementation. Just like planning the instructional program, the more time spent in pre-planning and coordination the less time is required for the actual functions or presentations.

The cost of the public relations program will be determined by the type and extent of the program developed. Public relations activities which include free meals, newspaper ads, and give-aways will be more costly than those built around demonstrations, service projects, and cooperative activities. Time, energy, and money required to accomplish a public relations program must guide each department in planning.

PR Activities

Public relations should be no different than any other program. "Plan the work and work the plan," as the saying goes. A good public relations plan can be broken down into four steps:

1. **Make a commitment to public relations for the vocational agriculture program, not just the FFA and the adult component.** Remember, public relations activities will not sway the opponents of the program but it will maintain current supporters and gain the undecided.
2. **Identify the target audience.** Potential audiences for public relations include service clubs, professional organizations, governmental agencies, and other youth organizations. Go to the Chamber of Commerce and obtain a list of all the local clubs such as the Kiwanis, Business and Professional Women, Toastmasters, garden clubs, senior citizens, and the Rotary Club. Each organization should be analyzed as to its members' educational level, age, and gender grouping, knowledge of the vocational agriculture program, and any previous bias for or against the program.
3. **Identify objectives.** The objectives of the public relations program are determined by the type of assistance desired from community groups. Is the desired assistance financial, with a community service program, or development of a network of future support? The answer to such a question will guide the development of public relations activities. In planning activities, consider the following questions as criteria guidelines: 1) Can the activity be related to one of the vocational agriculture program components: classroom/laboratory, SOE, FFA, or adult/young farmer programs? 2) Will the students benefit from the activity? 3) What resources will be needed?
4. **Plan action activities?** What are some action activities that will meet the above criteria? Look at the existing vocational agriculture program. What are some activities being done that could be expanded or modified to be good public relations tools?

One function of vocational agricultural education is to teach leadership skills. Almost every program teaches parliamentary procedure and has an FFA team that competes in parliamentary procedure contests or demonstrations. Service and professional organizations are always looking for good program ideas and most need help with parliamentary procedure. Let it be known through the Chamber of Commerce or by contacting organizational presidents or program chairs that students are available to provide a parliamentary procedure demonstration. This activity meets the criteria by being classroom related and by providing leadership experience to the students with time being the main resource required.

Additional examples would be horticulture skills for garden clubs, soil and water conservation demonstrations and programs, or pesticide safety demonstrations. Such programs would not only provide visibility, but would reinforce classroom and laboratory instruction in their preparation and presentation.

Highlighting segments of the vocational agriculture program could also make excellent programs for community groups. Offer a tour of student SOEPs, either in person or via slides with student narration. Develop a program around public speaking participants and creed speakers. Keep in mind programs do not have to be long. Organiza-



Share the vocational agriculture program with all community organizations and not just those that are agriculturally related. Providing speakers and demonstrations are low cost public relations activities that can help develop a network of community support. (Photo courtesy of Jacque Deeds).



Parliamentary procedure demonstrations are excellent in enhancing community relations. Student learning is reinforced while providing information most service clubs can use. (Photo courtesy of Jacque Deeds).

tions with breakfast or luncheon meetings usually schedule a 15 to 20 minute program.

Find out about the projects of community organizations and offer assistance. If the Optimist Club is supporting a home for the elderly, offer to provide animals for a petting zoo in the parking lot. If the American Association of University Women (AAUW) is conducting a seminar, offer child care services. If the Lions Club is having a pancake supper, offer to serve or clear tables.

Don't forget other youth groups. The Boy Scouts may need instructors for a safety merit badge or the 4-H program may need some skill demonstrations or livestock junior leaders. There is power in numbers. An activity co-sponsored with another youth group can reduce the cost, increase the coverage, and act as a recruitment tool.

Plan public relations to coincide with other activities in the community. In this the Bicentennial year of the Constitution, have your students develop public service announcements (PSA) with agriculture facts of 1787 and now. Finish the PSAs with a tag like, "This agriculture fact is brought to you by the Anytown High School Vocational Agriculture program." Use special town festivals as an opportunity to show off the program and the students.

The FFA provides some additional public relations tools, such as the Calendar program and materials developed for National FFA Week. Use these materials to the best advantage when highlighting that portion of the total program. Contest and award winners provide excellent photography opportunities.

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Enhancing Community Relations Through Public Relations

(Continued from page 15)

What Benefits From PR?

The letters in the word GAIN spell what enhanced community relations through good public relations can do for the vocational agriculture program. (See Figure 1)

The network developed through enhanced community relationships can be mutually beneficial. Commit to a public relations program before help is needed. Identify the potential community partners and develop objectives for the public relations program. Plan your work and work your plan around program related action activities. Get your vocational agriculture program into positive community relationships. You have everything to GAIN!

G — Gain attention for the vocational agriculture program through action.
A — Action activities create a setting for positive interaction.
I — Interaction of the community and the vo-ag program creates a network.
N — Networking develops support for the vo-ag program and all its components.

Figure 1: Enhanced community relations through public relations.

Figure 1: Enhanced Community Relations Through Public Relations

THEME

Developing A Good Relationship With Your Principal

It is essential that vocational agriculture teachers work effectively with their principals. High quality programs are the result of a team effort in which teachers and principals work together for the good of the students enrolled in the program. A good relationship with the principal can make working conditions very enjoyable. Strained relations are not only unpleasant, but also cause a decrease in the efficient operation of the educational system. Most often good relationships are the result of conscientious efforts. Poor relationships are most often the product of poor communication or a lack of understanding. This article presents ways to make the everyday dealings between principals and vocational agriculture teachers a pleasant and agreeable working relationship. Outlined below are the essential elements of establishing and maintaining a sound relationship with the high school principal.

Understand the Principal's Problems

President Harry S. Truman's famous statement that, "The buck stops here," is particularly applicable to the office of high school principal. In every organization, there has to be someone who is ultimately in charge and who accepts responsibility for any problems arising from inside the organization. The high school principal is certainly no exception. Have you stopped to consider not only the number but the variety of problems faced by the principal? Who is the person who solves the problems and/or complaints of students in the school? The teachers? The school



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board? The parents? Although others may provide some buffer and assist with some of the problems, it is ultimately the principal who is responsible for solving all the problems that can't be solved anywhere else.

A problem that might seem large to us could seem small and insignificant to a principal who has to deal with all of the problems in the entire school. How much of a concerted effort have you, the vocational agriculture teacher, made to lessen the problems faced by the principal? Principals are often on the receiving end of problems that could and should be resolved elsewhere. If the vocational agriculture teacher thoroughly understands the problems faced by the principal and the teacher is conscientious in attempting to solve as many of his or her own problems as possible, a feeling of respect can be established. If the only time the principal sees a teacher is when a problem needs to be solved, then the teacher may, after a while, not be a very welcome guest in the principal's office. On the other

hand, those who actively seek to help solve or prevent problems will rapidly be viewed as an ally by the principal.

Keep the Principal Informed

Perhaps the most crucial move a person can make when he/she assumes the job of vocational agriculture teacher is to plan to spend at least a couple of hours with the principal to explain what the program entails. All too often teachers assume that the principal has a clear idea of all the components of a quality vocational agriculture program. Often the principal's academic preparation is quite different in many aspects from that of the vocational agriculture teacher.

Programs of vocational agriculture are energetic and active, thus requiring coordination and planning to ensure that all components fit together. To someone whose basic contact with the program is when the teacher is wanting to get a day off from school to take students to a contest, the FFA can seem like an extra curricular activity. It is vitally important that principals and administrators have a good, basic concept of the integral nature of classroom, FFA, and SOEP. A thorough understanding by the principal of not only what we do but why we do it will lead to more of a willingness on his/her part to cooperate when we spend time away from school or when we need funds to travel to conventions and competitive events.

Principals should be kept informed of all activities of the program. Of particular importance is the advisory council. The principal should always receive an invitation to the meetings, an agenda, and a copy of the minutes. The principal probably will not attend all of the meetings but at least the vocational agriculture teacher should make him/her feel welcome at the meetings.

Principals always appreciate advance notice of upcoming events, especially those that require the vocational agriculture teacher's classes to be "covered" by other teachers or substitutes. Last minute notices cause undue stress on all involved. People understandably become irritated when they have to set aside their plans to deal with your problem.

Vocational agriculture teachers should be particularly careful to inform the administration about the summer program of work. Because most of the summer work is done away from the school, the administration may not be aware of what you are doing. A well planned, organized, and written summer program of work should be submitted to the principal prior to the time school is dismissed for the summer. A weekly schedule of where you will be and what you will be doing each day should be submitted to the principal each Monday. In addition, post a copy on the door of your building or classroom so anyone who comes by will be aware that you are on the job. This becomes increasingly more important as educators receive pressure for accountability.

Conduct a Quality Program

Most administrators take pride in the entire school program. Since most schools are community based, they thrive on community support. A dynamic program of vocational agriculture that has widespread community support adds to this sense of pride. Program standards must be kept high through constant program improve-

ment. Always seek input from school administrators and then follow their advice on improving your program.

The vocational agriculture facilities should be kept neat and attractive at all times. Visitors are constantly passing through the school grounds and the image of the school can be tarnished by a facility that is surrounded by scrap metal, half finished projects, and debris. The principal should be able to bring visitors to your classroom, laboratory, or office and show them a clean, well-kept facility. Cluttered facilities give the impression of sloppy management. Complaints about school facilities are most often directed at the administration. This understandably can lead to poor principal-teacher relationships.

Be a Team Player

The vocational agriculture program is a part of the overall school program. As such, the vocational agriculture teacher should be a part of the overall effort of making the school program an effective educational unit. It is easy to become so wrapped-up in the vocational agriculture program as to lose sight of the efforts of other teachers and programs in the school. Efforts at coordinating programs in the school won't go unnoticed by the principal. For instance, try teaching your class on livestock selection and improvement when the students are studying genetics in biology. Not only will this help achieve better working relations, but the students will benefit as well.

Often our facilities are located in a building separate from the main school. Because of the activities a vocational agriculture teacher can become involved in, it is easy for him/her to become an "isolationist" who never intermingles with other faculty. During breaks, the lunch hour, and before and after school we are often so involved with FFA committee meetings, solving student problems with SOEP, class preparation, etc., that we somehow never find the time to get to the other building to visit with the rest of the faculty. A faculty that works together makes the job of an administrator a lot easier. Teachers who stay isolated and only contact other teachers when help is needed create feelings of animosity that could be alleviated if only they would intermingle with other faculty members.

Give Credit

No school program can be very successful without the support of school administrators. Administrators who are supportive of our programs should be recognized for their support and help. At every banquet, the students should recognize the school administrators for their help in making the past year successful. Special certificates and plaques are greatly appreciated by administrators who have gone out of their way to assist with program activities. As consideration is given to those who should receive the Honorary Chapter Farmer degree, school administrators should not be overlooked. No one likes to put forth a large effort and not be thanked appropriately.

In summary, a quality vocational agriculture program takes a lot of effort from both the instructor and the administration. Good working relationships don't "just happen." They have to be established through a diligent effort by all concerned. Once good relationships are established, they must be carefully maintained. A lot of work? It sure is! But the benefits obtained are well worth the efforts in job satisfaction.

(Strategies for) Improving School and Community Relations

The strength of school and community relationships is being tested. Many public schools are engaged in fiery debates over which programs to cut and which to fund. These debates include teachers, parents, school boards, school administrators, students, and the general public. The issue is clouded by personal, social, professional, traditional, political, and economic concerns. Continuation of many vocational agriculture programs will depend on public approval or disapproval as future funding decisions are made.

Stabilizing the community's relationship and commitment to the vocational agriculture program is a primary concern of many vocational agriculture teachers. While many factors must be considered in building and maintaining a strong community relationship, the two major elements contributing to a program's success in building strong relationships are:

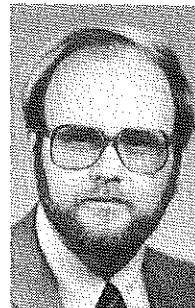
1. A **dedicated teacher** who has both human relation skills and a strong technical knowledge base.
2. A **well planned and implemented instructional program** that effectively meets the needs of the students and the community.

One might argue that without a dedicated teacher, a quality instructional program would not exist. However, for the purpose of discussion in this article, each is identified separately. Each element has several characteristics which are a focal point of a program with good community relationships. A closer look at each element will provide a better understanding of the importance of each in building a strong school and community relationship.

TEACHERS

Commitment of the Teacher

Much research on teacher effectiveness concludes that the teacher is the most important factor contributing to student learning. Likewise, teachers are important in building community support. The degree of teacher commitment required to build strong community support cannot be bought; however, a good salary will help meet the needs of the teacher and his/her family. Commitment cannot be mandated by the school board or administration. Commitment develops as the teacher internalizes the goals and philosophy of the profession. This internalization is both developed and strengthened through the teacher's efforts to (a) keep technically updated, (b) involvement in professional activities, (c) effective use of communication skills in teaching and dealing with internal and external publics, and (d) efficient management of day-to-day activities related to the program. The expression of teacher commitment that is evident through these actions



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becomes a strong determinant of success in building effective school and community relationships.

Because strong community relations are not built overnight, consistent teacher commitment is necessary. The public judges whether the teacher/program is addressing student and community needs by observing whether a teacher's actions match his/her words and whether those actions result in student learning. The youth are the most important resource in a community and the public observes everything related to how the teacher manages that resource.

Technical Competency

Teacher commitment is important, but it is useless without a knowledge base from which it can be applied. Demonstrating expertise in at least one area is helpful in developing teacher credibility. Technical competency increases teacher confidence which makes addressing the public easier. Gathering new knowledge and skills does not stop after college or at any point during the teaching career. While keeping up-to-date in today's rapidly changing society is a major concern of many teachers (AVA Task Force, 1986), some teachers have settled into a routine of teaching only those subjects they like or feel competent to teach. A willingness to take the time and effort to keep technically up-to-date and to plan educational activities to meet student needs is an indication of teacher dedication.

The public expects a teacher to be knowledgeable about a subject matter area. When the public taps that knowledge base, teachers need to be "in-the-know" and

not "in-the-dark." Desiring to avoid public situations where competency is questioned is natural; however, the ability to function in and deal with those situations is extremely important. The teacher should view difficult questions as opportunities to learn with those asking the question and to demonstrate how to locate an answer. Some teachers have postponed developing an adult program or some other aspects of a comprehensive program because of a real or perceived lack of knowledge/skill needed to deal with a subject matter area. The public is much more understanding and tolerant of a teacher's lack of knowledge when the community can see that the teacher is making a sincere effort to increase his/her knowledge base through activities such as workshops, seminars, university classes, field days, inservice education activities, and involvement in professional organizations. Involvement in such activities and the resulting demonstration of newly-gained knowledge and skills to in-school students and/or adults will gain the public's confidence and improve the quality of the school and community relationship.

Human Relations Skills

Human relations skills are important in expressing the goals, purposes, and activities of the program to the public as well as when teaching and working with students, parents, and employers. The public will learn of the program in many ways; however, the best spokesperson for the program is the teacher. A willingness and ability to meet and greet people in both formal and informal situations present many opportunities to discuss the agriculture program and establish teacher and program credibility. Working with others and taking part in community activities are part of becoming accepted and being able to function effectively. Many programs have suffered delayed success or even failure because of a teacher's lack of attention to good, basic communication practices.

On the other hand, some teachers have built better images than their programs deserve. In most of these situations, the image gives way over time, the true situation emerges, and the teacher and the program lose credibility with the public and the students. There is little or no benefit to building the program's image unless it is founded on a solid instructional program.

Professional Growth and Involvement

Professional growth and involvement extend to a wide range of activities in both agriculture and education. Keeping up-to-date with technical agriculture is important; however, equally important and of concern to the public is teacher accountability in use of resources and in professional conduct. Teacher participation in inservice education activities, professional associations, school board meetings, parent-teacher activities, and special university or state department activities are efforts to grow and fulfill professional responsibilities to the school system and the students. When appropriate, the teacher should inform the public of participation in professional activities.

Well Balanced Life

Balancing home and family life with professional responsibilities is as important as being knowledgeable and committed to the profession. The public expects the



Minigrant allowed vocational agriculture students to teach elementary students some of the skills taught in horticulture classes at Penta County Joint Vocational School in Perrysburg, Ohio. (Photo courtesy of Ron Fear, vocational agriculture teacher who secured the grant).

teacher to have a healthy enthusiasm for the program. However, the public also expects the teacher to balance his/her personal and professional life. The public may not voice this concern until a noticeable problem arises.

Relationships with family, friends, and God should not be sacrificed for the "good of the program." Trade-offs are a normal part of decision-making, but the extent to which those trade-offs result in the detriment of personal and professional life must be closely watched. When any set of priorities get too out-of-balance, the teacher will not be able to effectively communicate with the public. Extreme cases have led to burn-out, apathy, alcohol/drug abuse, student abuse, spouse abuse, broken homes, divorce, and dismissal. These problems do not stabilize the agriculture program or maintain the supportive relationship needed between the community and the school. Teacher stability is important in overcoming the everyday stress that could lead to burn-out, frustration, and apathy which lead to the deterioration of even the best programs. Having a well-balanced personal and professional life will help the teacher in all relationships, especially that of school and community.

Program Management Ability

Just as balancing the personal and professional life is important, so is the effective management of the vocational agriculture program. Careful forethought should be given to planning opportunities to share and promote various program activities. Many teachers randomly approach the management of program activities in terms of public perception. Some teachers think it is vain to view or plan program activities from the standpoint of public perception. Unfortunately, failure to plan often results in lost opportunities to establish or facilitate an improved community understanding and relationship. Acting first and thinking second is poor planning in terms of public relations and classroom performance.

Another important aspect of program management is the ability to share responsibility with the public. Sharing program responsibilities with groups such as an advisory

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(Strategies for) Improving School and Community Relations

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Making the Chamber of Commerce aware of vocational agriculture activities provides an avenue for community groups to learn about the instructional program. (Photo courtesy of Jacque Deeds of Mississippi State University).

committee, the FFA Alumni, parent support groups, and FFA members can lead to improved public support. However, sharing responsibilities requires effective communication skills and being a participant as well as a coordinator of activities.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Sound Instruction

Strong, long-lasting community relations are established by the committed teacher only if a sound, effective instructional program is the foundation. This foundation must consist of three elements: (1) teaching based on knowledge and skills representing the current agricultural industry, (2) effective teaching strategies involving a variety of teaching methods and techniques to develop the students' knowledge base and thinking skills, and (3) a program of instruction in knowledge and skills based upon the needs of the community and the occupational goals of the students. The goals of a sound instructional program are not confined to classroom/laboratory learning. Technical knowledge learned in the classroom/laboratory should be linked to the real world through work experience programs. Also, the development of personal leadership and citizenship through FFA activities such as Building Our American Communities (BOAC) should be incorporated into the comprehensive program of instruction.

Advisory Committee

Community involvement in program planning is important to successfully building school and community relationships and can be accomplished through an advisory committee. An active advisory committee can be instrumental in developing, improving, and publicizing a program. First-hand contact with and commitment of committee members to the program can be an effective public witness of the program's benefits and an encouragement of public support.

Instructional Resources

In addition to the traditional instructional resources, members of the community with useful knowledge and experience can be called upon to serve as resource persons. Their presence provides the two-fold advantage of (1) helping keep instruction up-to-date and interesting to both the students and the teacher and (2) providing an opportunity for community members to become involved with the program. The instructor's ability to successfully coordinate and plan resource person input while remaining in the background will help develop community pride and respect for the program.

Adult Education

Informing the public that the program's instruction can include more than high school students is very important. Today, farmers and ranchers need and are seeking educational help. A well-designed and implemented adult education program can have a positive impact on the community both economically and from the standpoint of increased community awareness and support for the program. When the public benefits from the school facilities and the teacher's expertise, they are more likely to support the program in "hard times." Through adult education, the teacher also develops a greater understanding of the dynamics of the community and the resources available for instruction.

Training for Employment

Since the mission of vocational agriculture is to prepare students for employment, the parents and employers can become involved with the program through student SOE programs. SOE programs are opportunities for the instructional program to communicate its mission to the community. Most parents appreciate knowing how and what their children are learning. Also, parents appreciate the teacher's dedication in supervising the student's work experience. Business people also like to see youth being trained for employment because youth with skills are less likely to leave a community.

Perhaps the best long-term gain on the investment of a quality program is the impact graduates have on the community. Graduates' ability to function as useful citizens builds self-esteem as well as appreciation for the program that helped them achieve their goals. Even if graduates leave a community or enter a different career, their success and satisfaction in the program can be a continued source of public support for vocational agriculture.

FFA

The FFA has been and will continue to be a tremendous asset in cultivating a strong relationship with the community. However, the FFA, even with all of its strong points, cannot be the only means of communicating to the public the goals and achievements of the program. Contests and awards are nice, but they do not develop the long-lasting relationships that encourage appreciation and stability of the program. Relationships built on contests/awards last from contest to contest and are as fragile as the mood of the contest team or judge. Communities that value the program based only upon winning of contests and awards often have an unstable relationship with the program. Most programs have many strong points on which to build public support; however, those points are

often overlooked because the public has been conditioned to value only the accomplishments of the FFA through the over-emphasis of contests and awards.

Another concern which sometimes arises from extreme teacher interest in contests and awards is the extent some teachers are willing to go to win. When the students and community perceive that a teacher is bending the truth to get one more award, they will begin to doubt the credibility of the teacher and the program. An extreme interest in contests and awards can also take quality time from the instructional program. When a teacher seeks awards for selfish reasons rather than for the personal and professional development of the students and the program the students' and public's attitude toward the program and the teacher can sour.

SUMMARY

An awareness that almost everything the teacher does can help improve the school and community's relations can become a vital turning point in the way a teacher approaches his/her job. Will Rogers said, "You never have a second chance to make a first impression." Teachers need to provide good first impressions, but they also must realize that all impressions received after the first one are equally as important to maintain and improve the relationship.

A strong community relationship is necessary for the survival of vocational agriculture. Today, as in 1937, the following can be said of vocational agriculture.

All vocational education is undergoing the acid test. Continually we hear rumors of reduced salaries and curtailment of expenditures. To survive we must do an excellent job. In other words we must justify the course in the community in which we teach. (Spafford, 1932)

Today, teachers are again facing public concern regarding the need for vocational agriculture programs. Continuation of tomorrow's vocational agriculture program cannot rest upon yesterday's successes. Teachers must inform the public demonstrating that today's vocational agriculture program is meeting the current and future needs of the community as well as of each student. We must take the time, just as others before us have done, to build program support and bring the school and community together. If vocational agriculture is to continue, we must strive to improve the community's understanding of the program "in everything we do."

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ARTICLE

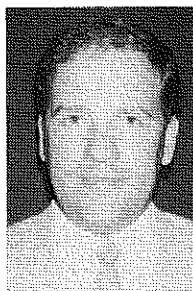
Promote or Perish: A Key To Survival

Over Three Hundred Employees Lose Jobs

Unemployment preys upon vocational agriculture and captures its teachers as victims . . .

The above news release could become a reality. Vocational agriculture is not immune to the realities of society, one being unemployment. However, in numerous situations vocational agriculture teachers possess the power to control the destiny of their profession, thus preventing the elimination of their programs and jobs. Quality products are the basis of a successful business, but it is the advertising of those products which leads to a business's growth and safeguards its success. Public recognition and exposure generate success. Is today's public aware of the quality products vocational agricultural teachers have to offer? Survival of tomorrow's secondary level programs depends on the public's belief and awareness that vocational agriculture fulfills numerous educational needs of the student population.

Vocational agriculture is not just cows and plows. Unfortunately, a segment of society stereotypes it as a training program for only farmers. True, farming is an important component, but only one of many. This limited perception deters nonfarming students at the secondary level from investigating the program's curriculum and



By JACK ELLIOT

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value. Many school counselors, a primary influence affecting enrollment, fail to understand (therefore, fail to communicate) vocational agriculture's total picture. The program at the secondary level promotes leadership, cooperation, and citizenship and deems them essential educational outcomes. It exposes students to a variety of agricultural career opportunities (agribusiness, forestry, horticulture, and production), and helps prepare each individual to be a productive member of society.

High school instructors can no longer rely on only students to discover the program's worth, and share its message. Students are only one of many publicity tools in-

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Promote or Perish: A Key To Survival

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structors must utilize, if secondary level vocational agriculture is to flourish. High school vocational agriculture instructors must heed the following warning, **Promote or Perish.**

Key Steps

Strengthening school and community relationships requires strong public relations. An effective promotional network, a built-in component in vocational agriculture, implements all existing options in its effort to sell vocational agriculture to the public. The rationale behind amplifying school and community relationships is survival.

The excellence in education movement has had an adverse effect on enrollment in many vocational agriculture programs. To resolve this dilemma, the profession must implement the following goals. First, each instructor needs to create a "personal best" vocational agriculture program. One must list the objectives considered important for the success of the program; analyze each objective and create simple and realistic steps that will allow one to obtain it; and climb those steps until the desired objective is reached. Second, the worth of the instructor's program must be publicized. People are hesitant to support an unfamiliar idea. One must list and employ all avenues that lead the public to believe in the value of vocational agriculture. Successful implementation of these two goals will result in a well informed school and community and enrollment growth.

Reaching Your Publics

The FFA Reporter. Weekly publication of program news in local newspapers heightens community awareness. Judging contests, conventions, FFA Week, supervised occupational experience programs, the banquet, student of the month, and class activities convey a message of constructive involvement. The reporter involves a cross section of members in the reporting process. Acting as a coordinator and editor, the reporter delegates reporting assignments, assesses each article's value and clarity, and presents final drafts for publication. The reporter communicates needs, concerns, and upcoming publications at weekly officer meetings. All articles are photocopied; a copy remains in the reporter's file, and copies are sent to local newspapers, and state and national FFA magazines. Radio and television are viable reporting options, media avenues reaching and informing the public. The additional arrangements they require reap satisfying rewards, notably increased exposure. A local news segment reporting the organization's involvement at a local fair or community event brings vocational agriculture to thousands of homes. A professional reporter's feature story or news segment brings him/her recognition and benefits vocational agriculture in the process.

Other FFA Officers. Publication of a monthly newsletter, the chapter secretary's responsibility, reiterates press releases, and alerts readers to program happenings. Including highlights of the month, upcoming events, and messages to the parents, it assures program communication with key supporters. The newsletter is sent to parents, school administrators, school counselors, school board members, agricultural advisory committee members, employers of vocational agriculture students, vocational administrators, FFA alumni, young farmers, legislators, and others expressing interest in high school vocational agriculture. The secretary additionally handles all program correspondence. Immediate responses to letters received, and thank you notes to individuals, organizations, and businesses promote an efficient and caring organization. Sincere gratitude perpetuates cooperation and support.

The chapter historian accurately records names of team members contributing to the chapter's success. Banners and awards, prominently displayed in vocational agriculture classrooms, reflect pride and accomplishment. A small card attached to each identifies team members earning the banner or award. Alumni appreciate recognition of past accomplishments, and proudly encourage continued chapter success.

The chapter scrapbook, an overlooked public relations tool, is a continual reminder of chapter activity and strength. The scrapbook keeper, a suggested officer position, organizes newspaper and magazine clippings, pictures, letters from prominent individuals, and certificates in a visually pleasing manner. A well thought-out and conspicuously placed scrapbook provides substance for conversation with classroom visitors. It is wise to display the scrapbook anywhere the chapter is participating.

Supervised Occupational Experience Program. SOE visitations are a powerful public relations medium. The instructor's attitude and presentation broaden parental understanding of vocational agriculture, and motivate parental interest and participation. Parents share new found information with community and school leaders, thus accelerating vocational agriculture's message. Including administrators, school board members, or legislators on visitations serves as an effective lobbying tool.

Agricultural Advisory Committee. A three year term on an advisory committee provides selected community individuals ample time to acquire an in-depth look at the program. The committee secretary prepares news releases for the local newspapers when the need arises. This group is publicly recognized for its efforts in chapter newsletters and at the banquet.

FFA Alumni. Active alumni are spirited initiators providing energetic and monetary support. Alumni, nourished by an appreciative instructor and chapter, enthusiastically relate "the rest of the story" to the community. An alumni reporter needs to be encouraged to submit articles regarding the group's activities. Initial

organization of an alumni group requires instructor guidance, and/or assistance of a well prepared and inspiring chapter reporter.

Young Farmers. Vocational agriculture continually enriches young farmers' lives. Through word and writing their testimony scatters seeds which take root in a community.

Adult Education. It is imperative that the instructor impresses adult students with constructive and well organized classes, and an orderly and clean classroom and laboratory environment. Offering requested courses demonstrates vocational agriculture's acknowledgement of community needs.

Intra School Involvement. Class or individual contests (e.g. safety poster contest), assemblies (e.g. highway safety program), and/or activities (e.g. Food for America) expose all grade levels and faculty to vocational agriculture. Planned and rehearsed presentations and introductions by vocational agriculture students promote a positive image. A participation certificate, rewarding contestant effort, acquaints each participant and the student's parents with vocational agriculture.

FFA Week. The National FFA Center in Alexandria, VA, has a wealth of free and affordable publicity information available. The chapter members anticipate the means which will effectively sell vocational agriculture, and purchase the necessary materials. During FFA Week, the chapter bombards both the school and community, publicizing the value of the program. A picture of the mayor declaring FFA Week is an ideal opportunity to signify FFA's importance. A local newspaper appreciates several months' notice if a large spread is desired. Give-away items, signs, posters, displays, demonstrations, and open houses are just a sampling of FFA Week propaganda.

Involving all individuals, organizations, and businesses associated with vocational agriculture stimulates camaradery. Invitations to visit the program are sent to administrators, community leaders, and other key supporters.

The FFA Banquet. Showcase is a synonym for the annual FFA banquet, a yearly highlight. Planning and preparation are mandatory requirements. Awards, decorations, and supplies are ordered well in advance. Four to eight months prior to the banquet, speakers are contacted and invited. Invitations, impressively designed, are sent to all newsletter recipients and high school faculty.

All members, each with specific responsibilities, contribute to a successful and memorable banquet. A rehearsal for the program alleviates possible problems (microphone and projector difficulties, script mix-ups, and etiquette mistakes), and assures smooth transitions the evening of the banquet. Guests leave the banquet with an impression. The chapter and instructor strive to guarantee that it is positive.

Fairs, Shows, and Exhibitions. Many Americans' only contact with vocational agriculture is viewing the FFA and its activities at fairs, shows, and exhibitions. These provide perfect stages promoting vocational agriculture. Professional displays, exhibits, projects, demonstrations, booths, and petting zoos are examples of possibilities advertising one's program. Properly dressed and well behaved students reflect a well-run and desirable organization. A fair without blue and gold jackets is like America without apple pie.

Official Dress. Wearing the FFA jacket exemplifies pride in one's accomplishments and the organization one represents. It reaffirms, particularly in older generations, confidence in the youth of America. It should be worn wherever students represent the FFA.

The Instructor. A capable instructor possesses the ability to organize and coordinate people and activities. Thus, the job becomes a rewarding, not taxing experience. Through the instructor's guidance and persistence, chapter members submit articles, draft newsletters, prepare public presentations, plan FFA Week activities, and execute a banquet. The instructor oversees the actions of the alumni group, the agricultural advisory committee, and the young farmers. This individual's professional dress code mirrors standards expected from students. The previously mentioned skills coupled with sincere respect and concern for alumni, school, community, and student interests characterize an outstanding instructor. This important individual *leads* everyone to a greater appreciation and understanding of vocational agriculture.

An Instructor's Challenge

Instructors need to continually evaluate all components (personnel, activities, and curriculum) of their programs and outline steps to strengthen weak areas. Each component is vulnerable, and if left unattended, may adversely affect others.

Utilizing suggestions which have proved effective for other vocational agriculture teachers provides a sturdy base for a respected program. A wise teacher builds on the valued experiences and advice of colleagues and educators. Creativity is important, but it's not productive to re-invent the wheel.

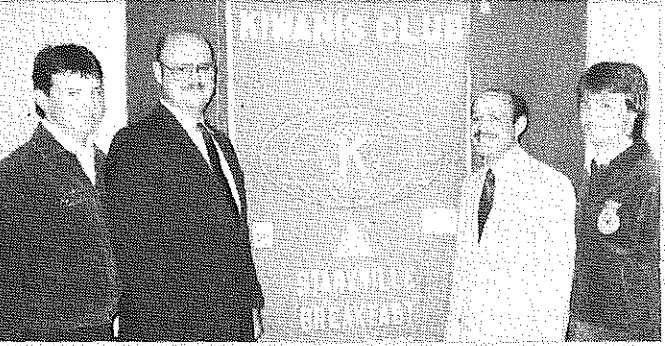
Good programs exist, and should not be kept "top secret." If a program doesn't warrant publicity, the instructor, with the help of school and community, needs to build a program worthy of praise. An administration and community do not generally question the status of a program they helped create.

It is imperative for instructors to remember that they are the primary catalysts in a public relations network. They hold the master keys to the survival of secondary vocational agriculture. To foster success, they must respond to the challenge awaiting them, **Promote or Perish.**

Relating to the School Community

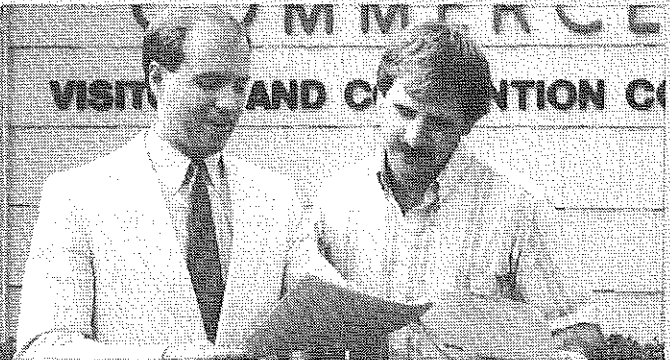


Horticulture teachers, both secondary and adult, can provide programs for garden clubs or senior citizen groups. These groups might supply resource persons for classes or other activities.

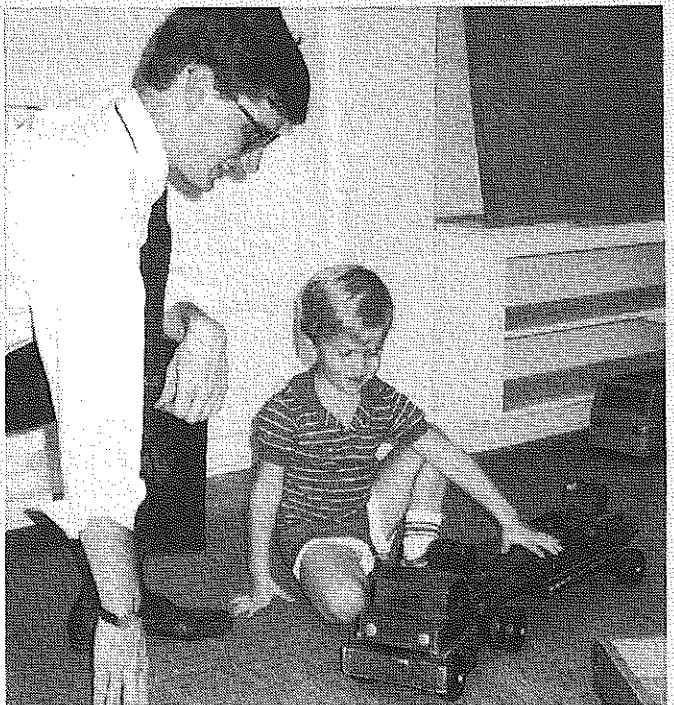


Enhance community relationships with two-way communication. Organizations that recognize vocational agriculture students should be properly acknowledged and provided with programs or other assistance in the future.

*(Photos courtesy of
Jacque Deeds, Photo Editor)*



The Chamber of Commerce can provide a list of local organizations and their presidents so you can better target public relations activities.



Free child care provided by vocational agriculture students during a banquet or seminar is one example of students cooperating with their key support groups to foster positive community relationships.



The objectives of the public relations program need to be determined by the desired results and available resources. If there is more than one vocational agriculture teacher or program, an "area" public relations program should be conducted.