

VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS

Assets to the Community

George C. Hill

Vocational agriculture comes the closest of any educational program to meeting rural America's need for a revived entrepreneurial spirit

Introduction

Professionals at all levels of agricultural education are often accused of having tunnel vision. When challenged to defend vocational agriculture programs, these professionals tend to describe the value of agriculture to the national or international economy rather than addressing the question at hand. Critics are not appeased with such evasive tactics. It is vital that the value of vocational agriculture programs be articulated to our critics.

It is important to look at the total value of vocational agriculture programs to the community. In this article, a community refers to a group of people with common interests who are living in a defined geographical area. It explores the value of vocational agriculture programs as they relate to individuals and institutions within the community, while addressing the value of vocational agriculture programs to the student, to other vocational programs, to schools, and to local agricultural industries.

Value to the Student

Reinforcement of Basic Skills. Secondary vocational agriculture programs provide a unique opportunity for students to apply basic skills learned in other classes. Vocational agriculture teachers are well prepared to structure learning activities and curricula to allow for application of these basic skills. For example, balancing animal rations and calculating acre feet of water are applications of basic math skills. Public speaking and parliamentary procedure

exercises combine oral and written communication skills that students learn, but often do not have the opportunity to practice or apply. In addition, such exercises also help students to develop skills in logic and analysis. Construction projects in mechanics laboratories enable students to apply drafting and math skills in each of Bloom's six levels of the cognitive domain. Such activities also allow for development of skills in the affective domain, an area which has received more attention in recent years. The development of pride in workmanship is one area of the affective domain that vocational agriculture programs have emphasized for years.

Two other areas of instruction that merit mention are problemsolving and individualized instruction. Problem-solving has been a primary component of vocational agriculture programs for years. These activities bring relevance to instruction and provide skills basic to private enterprise. Individualized instruction meets the needs of each student and is primarily carried out through the Supervised Occupational Experience (SOE) program. The SOE program allows vocational agriculture to be flexible, dynamic, and interactive with the student, parents, and community.

Vocational agriculture programs have been recognized predominantly for psychomotor skill development. Many learning activities conducted in vocational agriculture programs help students to develop those skills. Yet, vocational agriculture programs also provide students with skills in the affective and cognitive domains. Programs which encourage skill building in all three educational domains promote the development of the total person.

Interest in Education. Programs which integrate all three educational domains and reinforce basic instruction are effective in maintaining students' interest in education. Comments are often heard regarding students who were about to drop out of school until they enrolled in vocational agriculture classes.

Vocational agriculture programs help students view the relevancy of education from a different perspective. An interesting research topic would be to analyze the dropout

rates for students who showed no apparent signs of having problems in school. The number may be significant. Many vocational agriculture students may continue education past high school because of the relevancy of agriculture classes.

Careers. Vocational agriculture programs provide experiences which have an effect on the vocational maturity of students. A significant number of high school graduates who have a vocational agriculture background pursue careers in agriculture. Even those students who do not pursue careers in agriculture gain skills which are of assistance to them.

Several methods are available to measure the success of these programs. The career choice of program graduates is but one measure. Too often we ignore the obvious and overemphasize statistics without putting them in their proper perspective. A study of vocational agriculture graduates from the southern region of the United States¹ showed that 47.4 percent chose non-agricultural careers. Twelve percent were employed in agricultural occupations, while ten percent indicated they were operating their own non-agricultural businesses. In an era where there is concern for a lack of entrepreneurship, the percentage found to be self-employed in this study can be viewed as a positive indication of the value of vocational agriculture programs. In fact, Rosenfeld has stated that "vocational agriculture comes the closest of any educational program to meeting rural America's need for a revived entrepreneurial spirit."²

Development of self-concept. An important component in assessing the value of vocational agriculture programs is the opportunity for development of a positive self-concept in students. A positive self-concept is difficult to develop. It is also difficult to develop an accurate instrument for measurement. Furthermore, the nature of self-concept development necessitates that years be spent compiling data before judgements can be made.

One of the most important contributions a vocational agriculture program can make to a community is to assist in developing students' positive self-concepts. Students exiting programs with a positive self-concept will likely increase their chance for success regardless of their occupational choice.

Family unit. The high school years can be a turbulent time for the typical high school student. In addition to physiological changes, major psychological developments occur as well.³ Many families have trouble coping with the changes their teenagers experience. The personal contact vocational agriculture instructors have with students' parents can lead to identification and resolution of problems.

The home visit is one distinct feature that has long

been recognized as a key element for success of vocational agriculture programs. In fact, vocational agriculture teachers' personal contact with students may be the most important adult contact that some students experience. It has been stated that the contact students have with teachers is "the most important opportunity for them to learn from adults in our culture."⁴

Value to the School

Optional unit of instruction. In spite of discussion regarding the back-to-basics movement, educators should realize that only 20 to 25 percent of people in the workforce need baccalaureate degrees. Educators should also recognize that agriculture and other vocational programs reinforce basic educational skills and provide students with valuable life skills.

Quality vocational programs offer a valuable opportunity for both college- and non-college-bound students in career exploration and vocational maturity. In addition, vocational agriculture programs may help reduce high school dropout rates. Evidence of this belief is expressed in concerns raised by vocational agriculture instructors toward counselors and other school officials who use their programs as "dumping grounds." Most vocational agriculture teachers recall success stories about students who were close to dropping out before entering vocational agriculture programs. Their interest in vocational agriculture kept them in school until graduation.

Leadership for other vocational programs. The vocational agriculture program is generally the most visible vocational program in a community. The Future Farmers of America (FFA) activities project a positive image through competitive events and community service activities. The FFA jacket is a recognizable symbol of youth leadership. Vocational agriculture programs utilized local program advisory committees long before they became required. As a result of their effectiveness, many other vocational programs began using them.

The fact that other vocational youth organizations emulate the FFA suggests that vocational agriculture programs have been at the forefront of youth leadership. All vocational programs have youth organizations, and characteristics of the FFA are apparent in most of these.

Source of student leadership training and leaders. The public speaking, parliamentary law, and civic training that vocational agriculture students receive serve both students and the school. Students who have received leadership training generally choose to use those skills in school activities.

While many vocational agriculture students do become school leaders, the real measure of vocational agriculture leadership training is to observe who really get things

done within the system. Vocational agriculture students are often the real "movers and shakers" within the school community.

Leadership development is more than public speaking and parliamentary law. It involves commitment, responsibility, and a positive self-concept. Vocational agriculture helps students develop all of these traits.

Pride in achievement in the FFA. Most successful vocational agriculture programs have strong FFA chapters. FFA activities promote high achievement opportunities for both the group and the individual. It is unfortunate that some programs are referred to as FFA programs, but such references are indicative of the stature of the youth group.

Proficiency awards and the State and American Farmer degrees are coveted achievements agriculture students strive to attain. These awards are recognized and held on a plane equal to athletic honors and other accomplishments in school. Judging teams and community service activities, such as Building Our American Communities (BOAC), bring accolades to schools, which result in increased pride and achievement for students.

Link with the community. The local vocational agriculture program brings people in to the school on a regular basis. It is believed that vocational agriculture programs bring people into the school for visits who would otherwise have no reason to do so.

Schools whose only links to the community are in the area of athletics programs often fail to exist in the minds of patrons except for athletic endeavors. In these situations, vocational agriculture programs provide a vital link to the community in the area of academic and practical education.

Financial contributions. A large number of vocational agriculture programs provide at least part of their financial support. It is not uncommon to find programs with effective laboratories that function as small businesses. Some examples include the sale of hay or other products from the school farm, holiday plants from the program's greenhouses, or trailers constructed in mechanics laboratories. In most cases, money received from sales is re-invested into equipment and/or supplies to improve programs. The author is aware of several instances where sale of projects from agricultural mechanics labs resulted in funds being available to purchase state-of-the-art arc welding machines to insure that students completing the program were competent in the use of industry-quality equipment.

The instructor — a real unsung hero of vocational agriculture programs — is generally the motivating force in developing a self-sufficient program. Unfortunately, most instructors face situations where funds from the school district are not available to maintain state-of-the-art

equipment and supplies. Efforts to generate funds for upgrading equipment and facilities represent savings to the school and result in an instructional program where students are trained on the most modern equipment available.

Value to Agribusiness Community

Source of Competent Employees. Iverson⁵ indicated that fewer than 50 percent of high school vocational agriculture graduates found employment in agriculture-related occupations. While figures vary from program to program, it is believed that these numbers are reflective of vocational agriculture programs nationwide. However, these programs are critical for maintaining a reliable supply of competent employees for the agricultural enterprises in most communities.

The agribusiness community frequently assists in training future employees through Supervised Occupational Experience (SOE) or cooperative education programs. Successful SOE opportunities are an effective training method and insure that students receive up-to-date training. Such programs are an effective means of opening bridges between industry and educational programs, and they assist in meeting labor market needs.⁶

Educational Center for the Agricultural Community. Vocational agriculture instructors are often viewed as an important educational resource by the agribusiness community. Most instructors, through periodic inservice updates, remain current in their understanding and information on educational needs. The vocational agricultural facilities are appropriate locations for adult agricultural education programs.

Vocational agriculture instructors assist the community by conducting night classes for adults. Educational programs are made available in areas where instructors are recognized as having valuable skills to offer. For example, vocational agriculture instructors can play an important role in conducting classes to update farmers in the latest procedures for repairing equipment. The vocational agriculture mechanics laboratory is sometimes the only suitable location in the community for such instructional purposes. In some states, including Nevada, vocational agriculture instructors have coordinated and conducted workshops for producers on the application and integration of microcomputers in agribusiness operations.

Synergism with Other Agencies. The most effective vocational agriculture programs are those which have developed positive relationships with other agricultural education agencies. For example, numerous benefits are derived from efforts of local extension agents and vocational agriculture instructors to work together. Unfortunately, we generally only hear about the problems of such relation-

ships. Agricultural enterprises and the two youth groups, 4-H and FFA, are better served through cooperation. These individuals and institutions can better utilize their strengths and provide a high quality comprehensive educational program for the total community. Agribusiness industries and youth in communities where this positive relationship exists are getting more for their tax investment.

Vocational agriculture professionals should promote such relationships in every community. The promotion of such relationships will only strengthen the effectiveness and image of each organization.

Summary

Vocational agriculture programs are an invaluable asset in communities which support them. Unfortunately, we have allowed the total value of those programs to be ignored. All too often we have made quality assessments in very narrow terms. These assessments have been in narrow, easily defined and measured areas such as: percent of graduates employed in agricultural occupations; percent majoring in agriculture at a community college or university; or the percent of vocational agriculture graduates that are employed.

Empirical data indicate that students receive many valuable skills in these programs. Unfortunately, the data to support the value of vocational agriculture in broad terms do not exist. We have not measured the success of vocational agriculture programs in terms of appropriate career choices, positive self-concepts, and rewarding lives. Much research is needed in studying variables that contribute to a higher quality of life for our program graduates. The full impact of vocational agriculture programs can be measured only after much needed additional research.

We have heard much in recent years about vocational programs and their impact on schools. "A Nation At Risk" has caused educators and lawmakers to question whether there is time for vocational classes in the students' preparation for college. This short-sighted elitist attitude is having devastating effects on some vocational agriculture programs.

Educators and lawmakers must become aware of the value of vocational agriculture programs to the school and community. We must convey the message that vocational agriculture programs are of high value in the secondary schools. The message must also convey the premise that the value extends to the whole community.

While the agribusiness sector of most communities is usually aware of the value of quality vocational agriculture programs to their operations, the general public has not received the message. Our agribusiness community relies on programs as a primary source of trained manpower. Those in agriculture look to the vocational agriculture programs in order to update their technical skills. In this era of crisis on the farm, this contribution is more critical than ever.

Vocational agriculture education programs are of value to any community. The base industry in this country will continue to be agriculture. With approximately 23 percent of all people in this country receiving their livelihood from the agribusiness complex, programs that train students to enter careers in that industry are valuable. Yet, instructional programs in agriculture go far beyond career training. Vocational agriculture programs benefit students, schools, and the community in numerous ways. Vocational agriculture returns to a community many times its investment.

Footnotes

¹Iverson, M. "The role of vocational agriculture in the occupational success of graduates — a southern region study," in *The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture*, 21, pp. 11-20, 47, 1980.

²Rosenfeld, S. "Educating for entrepreneurship: looking to the past to guide the future," in *The Entrepreneurial Economy*, pp. 3-4, 1984.

³Myers, I.B. and P.B. Myers. *Gifts Differing*, Palo Alto, CA : Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1980.

⁴Csikszentmihalyi, M. and J. McCormack. "The influence of teachers," in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 67, pp. 415-419, 1986.

⁵Iverson, M., *op. cit.*

⁶Mortenson, J.C. and R.M. Foster. "The Blackfoot story — how cooperative education meets the needs of agricultural industry," in *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, 52, pp. 12-14, 1980.

George Hill is Head, Agriculture and Communications Education, College of Agriculture, University of Nevada at Reno.