

The Visitor

Devoted to the Interests of Agricultural Education in Minnesota Schools

Vol. LXIII

July, 1976

No. 3

SOME CONCERNS ABOUT SECURING AND SUSTAINING INTEREST OF STUDENTS IN A CAREER AS A TEACHER OF VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE

By

Dr. Robert R. Price*

Agricultural Education
Oklahoma State University

*Presented at the Southern Conference of Agricultural Education, Hot Springs, Arkansas, March 5, 1974.

What shall I do with my life? — Who needs me? What's in it for me? — Do I have what it takes to do it? — Who says so? — What will people think of me? — What do I *really* want?

These are age-old questions every youth keeps asking, to a greater or lesser degree. Many of us may keep asking these questions to some extent throughout life. But for high school and college youth these are very pertinent questions which they tend to answer only in part or are often tempted to respond on a very tentative basis. On occasion, coming to grips with the necessity for a firm decision may be somewhat of a traumatic experience. Toffler in *Future Shock* points out:

"The commitment to one style of life over another is thus a super-decision. It is a decision of a higher order than the general run of everyday life-decision. It is a decision to narrow the range of alternatives that will concern us in the future . . . Each time we make a style choice, a super-decision, each time we link up with some particular sub-cultural group or groups, we make some change in our self-image. We become, in some sense, a different person, and we perceive ourselves as different."

Choices of a career in teaching agriculture may well call for such a change in

self-image. It is quite evident that we need to know much more about how this *super decision* is made by the prospective student or by students now in our teacher education programs.

On the other hand, as teacher educators we hear such comments as: Why don't you give us more good teachers? — Why not teach what is needed and let the rest go by the board? — Where did these fellows coming out of your program get some of these fuzzy ideas? — Why do they know so little about F.F.A.? — What the devil are you guys doing, your job is to *produce* teachers who can *perform!* But above all *produce* live, warm bodies as *teachers!*

Well now, facts are facts; there has been a shortage of qualified teachers in at least 37 of the 50 states for the past decade. It is reported from reliable sources, I believe, that across the nation some 50 or more local departments of vocational agriculture were unable to continue or initiate programs because they could not obtain either qualified or even partially qualified teachers. In one state alone over 50 teachers were employed on a "provisionally qualified" basis.

Our problem, then, is how to *first* discover what factors motivate students to consider teaching vocational agriculture as a career; *second*, discover how to acquaint students with both the advantages and opportunities presented through a career in vo-ag. As a *third* step we must discover how to attract students to enroll in agricultural education programs at our respective institutions. Further, I would submit that there is a very crucial fourth step — that of sustaining interest and commitment during the period the student is pursuing undergraduate studies. It is of paramount importance that our programs in teacher education be quality programs, programs that support the student in his career choice and significantly strengthen his resolve to turn toward and further develop that "life style" demanded

of the successful teacher of vocational agriculture. This is the "super-decision."

Obviously, if we are to successfully accomplish our *terminal* objective of maintaining an adequate supply of well-qualified available teachers we need to assess our capabilities for following through each of these four vital steps.

As I was pondering preparation of this presentation, it suddenly dawned on me that we at Oklahoma State University had, down through the years, been accepting some assumptions about career choice as a teacher of vocational agriculture, assumptions which just might not withstand testing. I then was forced to realize that there wasn't much time for preparing a proposal, getting it funded, gathering data, deciding which computer program to use, collating data, drawing conclusions, and above all publishing an opus with my name prominently displayed on at least six pages. Yes, I would need to have letters of critique and at least mild approval from no fewer than 20 of our elite researchers in vocational education.

I am indeed sorry that I cannot bring you today a report having enough sophistication to be acceptable to some as a reliable and valid research effort; but, my dear fellow associates, there just wasn't enough time after I received this assignment. On second thought, maybe this was just as well, because in desperation I turned to the very people who perhaps can best enlighten us on the matter anyway — junior and senior Ag Ed majors at our own institution. We asked them to honestly tell us how and at what point they recognized their own "super-decisions" as made or in the making — that decision to become a teacher of vocational agriculture.

After discussions with some of our undergraduate and graduate students we developed a schedule for obtaining responses in three areas definitely associated with career choice for vocational agriculture teaching. These areas were: (1) influence of selected *persons*, (2) self perceived *job characteristics* having appeal and (3) a source of *reinforcement* of final confirmation of job *image* and *acceptance* of a Vo-Ag teaching career.

Data presented in Table I reveal student responses as to the nature and

extent of the influence of certain selected *persons* upon the final decision to become a teacher of vocational agriculture. Of what significance is it that their local vocational agriculture teacher ranks first among the influentials, with an outstanding 62.5 percent responding that this influence was *very great*? And then, a bit lower, but next in rank, parents and college instructors have very close average scores. It was not surprising to me that high school counselors ranked so low, but I had not expected other high school teachers to have a decidedly higher ranking than counselors.

Findings shown in Table II, centering attention on the relative force of *appeal* of certain job *characteristics* to the respondent gives us much concern for shaping up both effective recruitment and in-service preparation programs. In terms of average score rankings we discover that among our Oklahoma students "opportunity to work with livestock" is of first appeal, with four rather closely related characteristics (a) "opportunity to work with youth," (b) "self-satisfaction of helping educate students," (c) "opportunity to advance professionally in agriculture," and (d) "to achieve a broad knowledge of agriculture" grouped closely together. It is also a matter worthy of note that "opportunity to move into full-time farming" and "anticipated salary" are the two items assigned the lower average scores in this area of inquiry.

When we examine the responses provided in Table III, *Sources of Final Decision Confirmation to Choose Teaching Vocational Agriculture as a Career*, we again find respondents grouping sources in terms of average scores given with (a) "your own experience in Vo-Ag," (b) "extended conference with an ag teacher," (c) "observation of events; fairs, shows, etc.," and (d) "agricultural education teachers in college ranking significantly above the other selected sources offered for response." Even though almost one-fifth of respondents indicated "brochures, bulletins, etc." as of "great" influence, this item, as a source, ranked last among the eight selected sources offered.

On the basis of these and other obser-

vations and findings let us draw a somewhat general conclusion. Foremost among many factors affecting the student in choice of a professional career as a teacher of vocational agriculture is the nature and extent of his own experiences in and with vocational agriculture. If, in fact, a number of these satisfying experiences have been with agriculture, in Oklahoma more specifically livestock, the student seems to recognize teaching Vo-Ag as of high value for achieving further satisfactions of like nature. Priority is also given to the concept or ideal of "helping to educate students" and "opportunity to work with youth." Individuals adjudged to have strong influence include (a) the local agriculture teacher, probably his own, (b) parents, (c) college instructors, more specifically Ag Ed teachers, and (d) fellow students in college. It should also be pointed out that nearly 45 percent of respondents indicated that the influence of "supervisors and officials in vocational agriculture" was either a "very great" or "great" influence in their "superdecision" to become a teacher of vocational agriculture.

Now for some recommendations:

First, let us appeal for a much closer working relationship among and between (1) the teachers of vocational agriculture; (2) state officials, supervisors, FFA executives, etc.; and (3) teacher educators. Why is it so difficult for us to realize that if we are to maintain a sufficient supply of teachers, we must exert a mutual sustained and continuing effort beginning with concern with the nature and quality of the experience which secondary students are now receiving, both in the organized, formal teaching program and in the more informal activities of F.F.A.?

Sometimes in my more discouraging moments I am prone to wail "whither has gone our glory," and yet I know there exist hundred and hundreds of top-notch Vo-Ag programs across this land of ours. This, hopefully because of, and not in spite of, the efforts of supervisors and teacher educators. Frankly, with the evidence we now have at hand, I cannot understand why all teacher educators do not identify more closely with their state and national associations of vocational agriculture teachers. Why do we not make

student membership in NVATA an affiliation to be desired by all trainees? Why do we not take advantage of more opportunities to work closely with teachers in local departments and students in local FFA chapters? Why are district and state conferences often either ignored by teacher educators or experienced as an observer rather than as a true participant? And, above all, speaking the pre-service experience of students in agricultural education, why are we so indifferent or even antagonistic toward an effectively functioning Collegiate FFA, ATA, or other Ag Ed club?

To what extent do teacher educators actually sustain and nurture the two priorities "opportunity to work with youth" and "self-satisfaction of helping to educate students"? I submit to you that we may not see the forest because of the trees, and some of this carefully developed "sophisticated, competency, performance based" growth may be really little less than sage brush or slash pine to our students in training. Understand, I am quite cognizant of the value we have received from competency or performance-based concepts of teacher education. We try to assist our students by incorporating these patterns into our programs at O.S.U., but I literally blew my stack two years ago when I received a schedule asking me to rate a total of 328 vocational administrator competencies, so-called. I just recognized this as the effort of some far-removed teacher educator attempting to inflict further trauma upon his colleagues.

This point is, how realistic are undergraduate and graduate programs at our respective institutions? Do we give first efforts to providing meaningful, participating learning experiences for those students — experiences which are directed toward sustaining and enhancing the image of vocational agriculture which brought them to us? Or do we antagonize him by trying to fit him into a rigid "learning mold" of our own making which honestly wasn't very successful 30 years ago when we thought we discovered it? Or it may be a "mold" developed more recently by an isolated researcher who may have never taught a successful year of vocational agriculture.

In summary, may we again stress the importance of our involvement with the student from his high school days through his college studies. Further, let us stress a continued strong identification with agriculture. Let us so structure our teacher education programs that this identity will be maintained and that the student will directly relate his learning experiences in college with the real program that occurs in a local department and the local F.F.A. chapter.

Finally, let us acknowledge that arousing interest, sustaining interest, and providing participation in a stimulating and enjoyable atmosphere of preparation is a task for all three of us — teachers, supervisors, and teacher educators.

WHY I AM A GRADUATE STUDENT

The following articles have been written by graduate students in Agricultural Education.

Larry Zilliox (Arlington, Minnesota) — During the past three years I have been with the Minnesota Extension Service in Sibley County. Sibley is located in South Central Minnesota in a very productive farming area. The major enterprises in the area are corn, soybeans and dairy. My main responsibility as an extension agent is the 4-H Youth Program with some additional emphasis on horticulture and animal husbandry programs. The extension agent director and the home economist have responsibilities in the other major areas such as crops, community development and home economics programs.

There are three major reasons why I asked for a leave of absence to return to school to do advanced work. First of all I found myself inadequately prepared in several areas. We were planning more and more programs in farm management and estate planning as farmers become aware of their financial situations. The farmer wanted to pursue these areas in greater detail and I found my knowledge of the basics inadequate to handle the questions being asked. This ignited a renewed interest in this subject matter and made me aware that I needed further education.

The second reason I decided to return to school was to explore in depth several theories of adult education. Questions

that I had included — What are the theorists saying about this exciting field? Are there new ideas being presented adult education which I could adopt into my program? Another question that I want to try and answer is what "pitfalls" must I look for as I move from primarily youth education into adult education? What techniques have been most effective in educating adults and what looks the most promising in the future? These are some of the questions I hope to answer as I become a better student. The third reason I decided to return to school was personal. I wanted to interact with other educational professionals as they searched for answers to this complex educational process.

I only hope that I can fulfill these three objectives during my leave without creating thirty more in the process.

VOL. LXIII THE VISITOR No. 3

Published quarterly during the calendar year in January, April, July and October by the Division of Agricultural Education University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn. 55108

Second class postage paid at St. Paul, Mn.

THE STAFF

GEORGE COPA	ROLAND L. PETERSON
GORDON SWANSON	W. FORREST BEAR
CURTIS NORENBURG	EDGAR PERSONS
MILO J. PETERSON	GARY W. LESKE
R. PAUL MARVIN, Editor	