

The Visitor

Devoted to the Interests of Agricultural Education in Minnesota Schools

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Cheers for Old Curmudgeon!

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This is the preface to the catalogue of Curmudgeon College, an experimental – in fact, still imaginary – institution of higher learning.

Our Philosophy: No student should feel compelled to attend a college he doesn't like. So if you disapprove of something here, don't bother to demonstrate. Just leave.

Our Policy: Absolute freedom, tempered with occasional expulsions.

Dormitory Rules: We don't have any. As a matter of fact, we have no dormitories. Our founder and president, Henry J. Curmudgeon, can't see why an educational institution should be distracted by running a hotel business on the side. So our students live anywhere they like – motels, boardinghouses, brothels, or communes. How they behave there concerns only them, their landlords, their parents and the local police.

Sports: For the same reason, we have no sports program. Why mess around with show biz when Joe Namath can do it better? Any undergraduate who feels in need of exercise can apply to the maintenance department for a broom, or can go to Jocko Sullivan's Gymnasium located near our downtown campus. Obsessive exhibitionists are free to hire their own basketball court or football field.

Sit-Ins: All students are welcome to sit in any classroom as long as they like for the standard lecture fee of \$1 an hour, payable at the door. But any attempt to sit in the administration building will be treated as criminal trespass by our town sheriff, Knucks McGrory (six-foot-three, 280 pounds). Undergraduates, in fact, have no occasion even to go near the administration building, except on the first day of each term, when enrollment fees are payable at the drive-in window.

Governance: The college is governed by President Curmudgeon, period. He hires and fires the faculty, fixes salaries, sets the curriculum, makes final decisions on the admission and expulsion of students. He may from time to time consult the faculty on administrative matters, but feels no obligation to take their views seriously. Early in his career, President

Curmudgeon learned that the typical professor can't administer his way out of a paper bag. As he observed in his now famous paper on collegiate governance:

"The true scholar is inherently incapable of running anything. By temperament, he loathes the very concept of authority and, even more, the idea of exercising authority himself. Consequently our faculty is limited to its proper functions: teaching and research, in that order."

"Students participate in governance the same way that customers participate in the governance of Macy's: If they don't like the goods offered, they can go to Gimbel's."

Tenure: None. Each faculty member signs an undated resignation the day he is hired, and serves at the president's pleasure. In academia's prevailing sellers' market, a talented man can always take his pick of a dozen chairs; tenure, therefore, merely shelters the incompetent.

Nevertheless, to make sure it gets the best men, Curmudgeon pays salaries twice as high as the normal scale. In addition, it offers fringe benefits. Professors never have to waste their time in committee meetings or the deliberations of an academic senate. They also are freed from the demeaning obligation of cranking out "scholarly works" to demonstrate "productivity." On the contrary, they are discouraged from writing anything for subsidized publications – that is, for a scholarly journal or university press. When a professor has something worth putting into type, any number of commercial publishers will be delighted to get their hands on it.

There is also our Professorial Piece-of-the-Action Plan. Instead of enrolling for formal courses, students simply attend any lectures or seminars they consider rewarding – basing their choices on the catalogue descriptions, the "Student Appraisal of Faculty" published each term, and the campus grapevine. Such choices are not made lightly, since undergraduates have to drop a dollar into a toll box every time they enter a classroom. Those teachers who consistently produce above-average gate receipts get a

percentage of the take. Our star performers, as a result, earn more than football coaches. On the other hand, any professor who cannot attract enough paying customers to cover his own salary, plus overhead, is encouraged to take up some other calling.

To avoid rewarding the merely entertaining lecturers at the expense of the more profound, classrooms are monitored with closed-circuit TV so that the quality of each professor's performance can be periodically evaluated by a recognized authority in his discipline.

Admission Policy: Elitist. No student is admitted unless he demonstrates his ability to write a page of coherent, correctly spelled english prose. Moreover, this college is designed for those who already know what they want to do with their lives, and want help in preparing for it. Undergraduates who prefer to put in four years of intellectual fingerpainting while they "find themselves" can go elsewhere.

We are not accredited, and we award no diplomas. Instead, a student may, if he wishes, ask for a Certificate of Competence in his chosen field — whenever he thinks he is ready for it and can persuade his teachers to sign it — whether after two years of work or seven. A Certificate of Competence, we have found, is of interest to employers, but it confers no social prestige.

Examinations and Grades: If a student feels that an examination will help him measure his progress, he may ask his teacher to give him one. Or, if a teacher is in doubt about a student's progress, he may call for a written or oral examination. Otherwise, no exams are required.

Neither are grades. When any three of his teachers decide that an undergraduate is goofing off, wasting their time and his own, he is expelled. This seldom happens. Since Curmudgeon is an expensive institution offering nothing but a chance for education, it usually attracts only those youngsters who are eager and able to do the work.

Financial Aid: Available on request to all students, on a lifetime reimbursable basis.

We cheerfully advance whatever money an undergraduate may need to cover his fees, living expenses and door tolls. In return, he promises to pay us one percent of his annual income for the rest of his life, beginning one year after graduation.

Any bright youngster, no matter how poor, can get an education without financial strain. Moreover, the one-percent reimbursement is the best investment he can ever make, since a practical, profession-oriented training of the kind we offer normally multiplies his lifetime earning capacity by at least ten.

For the college, this system produces a dependable — and rising — flow of revenue. The president thus relieved of the humiliating and onerous chore of constantly begging for money, can devote his full attention to running the place, to the obvious benefit of both students and faculty.

How Bold An Adventure

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A vexatious USOE vocational education policy has asserted itself in Illinois and Iowa — which may even be good news for Agricultural Education if it remembers what happened to Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary.

Back in their home barracks, the troops have a breather to evaluate the lessons learned on the banks of the Sangamon in Springfield and in the snows at Des Moines. Strategically, the Ag Education regulars found themselves boxed-in as they took part in the USOE exercise, "Bold Adventure". There is no doubt that agricultural education was kept fully extended during both skirmishes. And now with a lull in the action, intelligence reports are getting a good working-over.

Generals in the USOE Command Staff Headquarters conceived the Illinois and Iowa exercises not so much as a test of stamina as it was a test of strategic mobility. It was a bold calculation. And if it eventually doesn't come off, it will be because agricultural education knows enough about salami tactics not to put themselves under the slicer.

If intelligence is correct, it appears that the USOE command staff was beset with a certain sense of claustrophobia which very well might point to the underlying reason for the dog-baiting tactics that accompanied the exercises. Namely, the USOE was so up-tight that it was willing to sacrifice the integrity of one or more of the service units to strengthen its position for the impending battle with the USDL for sovereignty over vocational education.

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Perhaps this sounds like a dramatic way of explaining the divisive Springfield and Des Moines actions. However, one thing is clear: the USOE adopted a strategy that was aimed at securing and maintaining administration over all vocational education, pre-school to the grave. Its tactics were straight-forward: mobilize a unified Vocational Education Division at all costs. The outcome has been equally straight-forward. Agricultural education has been the recipient of some rather vicious bayonet-sticking. To date, the leveling-down process ("total emphasis" not deemphasis, it's called) has taken its greatest toll in the svering of agricultural educations' logistic tail. It belongs, for the time being, to an administrative commune.

The exercises highlight some of the problems facing agricultural education in reconciling a new strategy. Just why the state staff within agricultural education — deans to educators — chose to move so slowly in extending curricular offerings beyond the production perimeter is anyone's guess. Shrinkages in farm population and territory, curricularly, were accepted *fait accompli*. Curricular offerings grew defensive. The strategy was not unlike that of Emperor Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary. Like him, agricultural education command staff had an inkling that the old empire needed repairing. Like him, too, they were desperately reluctant, in most cases, to make any radical strategy changes.

Since the limits of what was taught (and to whom) had become sacrosanct the outcome in Illinois and Iowa seemed quite predictable. That is, agricultural education could be counted on withdrawing into curricular and service areas where the ratio of subject matter to student population was growing less favorable each day.

Illinois continues to lick its wounds after the July 1969 putsch. With Illinois under its belt the 'totalists' showed their real color with a public castration of Iowa agricultural education. Quite clearly, the Iowa incident is a signal that totalist forces in vocational education are quite ready to bury agricultural education to reinforce their internal (USOE) empire. And if Iowa is any indication, the tactics attempted in other states will be less subtle and more provocative than those up to this point.

What is puzzling is why blood need be shed and why the totalists seem to have lost view of their main goal, namely, maintaining integrity in the nation's vocational education programs. Surely there must be a more rational process than setting fire to vocational education!

Perhaps this is asking too much of the harassed men in Washington. But given the domestic problems of the growth in vocational education (including the in-house power aspirations between the services), and the impending clash with the USDL, they have incentive enough to try. Of course, it would require a great deal of imagination: imagination which men uncertain of their position may not have.

For agricultural education the path is clear: mobility must be brought to curricular offerings coupled with providing the educational teeth necessary to maintain integrity in existing training programs.

All twelve grades and either sex are fair game for either curriculum components or complete courses. It's all out there: Teaching color harmony (K-12) with live material in natural settings. Exploring the geometry of nature (K-12). Dusting off green biological principles (4-12) with practical in or out of school exercises. Or providing environmental ecology instruction (K-12) with individual and group projects. The entire area of consumer education/protection can become a very relevant and interesting offering for student and teacher alike with agricultural instructors providing the instructional leadership.

With some imagination (which there is) and some very critical logistical support (which may not be, so readily available) an extensive effort needs to be mobilized to move agricultural instruction into new schools, particularly junior high schools and metropolitan area schools. The immediate (short-run) cost of this effort should be borne by the Colleges of Agriculture. Colleges are mentioned for two reasons. First, total or comprehensive vocational education programs will get first call when it comes to State/Federal Vocational Education funds while agricultural education per se will be left to scrap. Second, Agricultural Colleges are perhaps the single most responsible parties to keeping the doors shut to non-production/management curricular areas and non-rural student populations.

To assist in scaling-up production oriented programs, which either have or are in the process of going urban, new curricular carriers are needed coupled with some rather extensive teacher in-service training. Experiments by some schools indicate that one and two semester courses show much more saleability among *all* student levels than the 2 to 4 year lock-step programs that we have now. The range in titles of the semester courses is indicative of their student appeal and instructor imagination: Mechanics for Consumers (girls), Environmental Ecology, Flower Design, Basic Mechanics (special needs level), and Individual Study — where students do their own thing, e.g. a job or studying alongside a park district botanist working with pollution tolerant plantings along expressways.

But imagining these programs and making them tactically operational are two quite different tasks. Just how the programs and their various components should be used is beginning to sort itself out, but getting them operational is presenting another crop of problems. Agricultural program offerings are becoming normalized in suburban/urban schools with only limited practical work reinforcement which is casting doubt on the vocational integrity of these program offerings.

Ten month teaching contracts coupled with increased student-teacher load are also compounding the problems of teachers faced with sorting-out the juxtaposition of program components in a metropolitan milieu. The situation is further acerbated by a genuine lack of experienced personnel, state and university, to assist in metropolitan program developments.

To compensate for personnel constraints and short logistic tail two options appear open. Each can be immediately implemented by teacher training institutions with possible minimal state funds for support. First, schools possessing exemplary work study programs in suburban/urban areas must be more fully utilized by agricultural teacher training institutions for the next crop of teachers. Initially, this might mean that some teachers might serve all or a portion of their student teaching experience in a school not offering agricultural coursework, but having an exemplary occupational work-study program. Second, continuing in-service industry work experience programs, carrying full university credit, should be initiated (if already not) accompanied by a vigorous personalized enrollment effort to enlist participation from teachers in urban and suburban schools. Community sensitivity needs to be maintained in these teacher work experience programs, that is, participants should be kept out of university classrooms and in local firms where they can begin to establish neces-

sary contacts for future student work study programs and do a bit of re-thinking on just what it takes to survive in today's job market.

Quite clearly the brightest spot in the Illinois and Iowa exercises was the almost immediate support mobilized to re-establish and strengthen FFA options. A rationality prevailed that didn't give way under the cost-benefit job oriented technical-skills barrages of the totalists. The marketplace arguments of the totalists were rhetorically impressive: agricultural education undoubtedly could field a program that was economically more efficient, served more people, and was more sensitive to technological turn-over.

What was forgotten or perhaps never learned by Generals Venn and Allen was the fact that agricultural education had nibbled on the same choice skills morsels during the Second World War and chose to avoid them in constructing the foundation of their program.

As the men who matter in agricultural education get at the job of reworking her infrastructure they'll find her foundation (marketplace priorities) sound. However, they should consider what happened to the old Emperor. He doggedly fought change. And for a while succeeded beyond all expectations. But when he finally went, the whole ramshackle old apartment house that he so lovingly tinkered with, collapsed like a house of cards.