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STANDARDS, ACHIEVEMENT TESTS OR GUIDING PRINCIPLES . . . WILL THEY AID STUDENTS IN VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE?

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What constitutes excellence in a vocational agriculture program? Is it possible to accurately identify an outstanding program? Is it possible to have just an average vocational program? It seems that unless a program is 'above average' or 'good' it has little chance of surviving for any period of time. How are Vo-Ag programs evaluated? After 60 years of program development, does the profession have established criteria for evaluation? If you were asked to develop guiding principles for evaluating a high school or post-high school vocational agriculture program, what would you design? In their book on curriculum planning, Saylor and Alexander have stated that:

To evaluate is to determine the value or worth of something, an worth is expressed in relation to some type of criterion. The worth of the curriculum cannot be expressed as easily as that of services and goods valued by the criterion of dollars, although such a quantitative expression is attempted when standardized test results, for example, constitute the criterion.¹

Today it is almost commonplace for the media to attack the public school system for supposedly not teaching basic reading, writing and arithmetic. The unfortunate aspect of the press is that it infers that all students fail to read and write and perform adequately in mathematics. The press fails to mention that a high proportion of high school graduates are very competent young people who blend into society and the world of work or -post-secondary education without difficulty. The results of a poll recently reported in the Minneapolis Tribune revealed that 57 percent of the people indicated they would rate the public school system as fair to poor.² How

will school personnel, legislators, the courts, boards of education, pressure groups, parents and anyone interested in schools react? It seems obvious that the wheels of education are again repeating a cycle. Obviously the once used state testing program will again emerge. This time it may rise under the guise of competency based education and will evaluate or test students ability to perform prescribed competencies. It is interesting to note that 'state examinations' lost their popularity because teachers began to teach so that students could pass the tests. Why are the same agencies which abolished statewide testing a few decades ago suddenly clamoring for a reinstatement of a test program? Was the reason statewide testing was dropped due to the publics urging of schools to teach students competencies which other institutions in the community, such as the home, were failing to do? It seems that the development of the individual as a whole person was extremely important and mental achievement along with social, emotional and physical development were equally valuable. Obviously we are on our way back to the realm of checking out achievement in some manner. Where is vocational education and specifically vocational agriculture education in this movement? Saylor and Alexander have indicated that one problem in relying solely on achievement standards as criteria is that test scores alone are in a position of totally controlling the school curriculum and curtailing change. Educators today must face the critics and maintain a positive influence on the establishment of criteria for evaluation. There is nothing wrong with evaluation, however, the early impression one may detect today is that the evaluation tends to focus largely on 'testing' the product. There seems to be a lack of emphasis being placed on product evaluation aimed at assessing a graduate's performance in society, in post-secondary education and in the world of work. It also seems that everyone is rushing to get in on the act.

In the midst of this clamor for evaluating achievement, numerous critics are pointing out the fallacies and weaknesses of achievement testing. Thus it will be interesting to observe the types of measurement instruments which may emerge to evaluate the students level of competence. If achievement is evaluated, agricultural educators have access to an instrument in the Houghton-Mifflin Content Evaluation

Series. Consequently, when guidance personnel in a high school order Geometry, Language Arts, Biology, Mathematics, Science, Algebra, Economics, Office Information and Skills tests, they can include Agriculture in their request. The Houghton-Mifflin Company does have a 1973 version of a nationally tested four-part Agricultural Achievement Test. The test consists of four sub-tests—Animal Science, Plant and Soil Science, Mechanics and Management—each with a working time of 40 minutes.³ The test was given to 5,000 Vocational Agriculture students across the country on which norms were based.

Will agriculture and vocational educators react in an after-the-fact manner to the establishment of competencies and evaluation schemes and instruments?

It is interesting to note that agricultural education has endured for at least 60 years without establishing a set of national standards. In the absence of national standards, apparently locally developed criteria (whether written or unwritten) were the basis for program evaluation. Today, we have a set of national standards! One may ask the question, what will national standards do for us? Will they be used as an evaluation tool? Will they assist us with evaluating the process or the product? It seems they can function in at least two ways: (1) they can be ignored, or (2) they may be used as lever for change so that students can have a better experience in vocational agriculture. For more than half a century, apparently locally developed criteria for evaluation have resulted in agriculture teachers studying local needs and establishing criteria and programs to satisfy those needs. Has vocational agricultural education been 'lucky' to survive in the absence of standards? You must be the judge but it seems that the evidence of increasing numbers of students enrolled in vocational agriculture programs, improved facilities and the continued placement of students in jobs reflects more than pure luck.

In an era of declining enrollment in secondary schools and inevitably in post-secondary schools, what will be the guiding principles that will assist school personnel and boards of education in determining 'what to cut'? Yes, schools must face programs cuts. As harsh as that language appears to be, it seems that as enrollments decline budgets will NOT be permitted to increase either by state spending limitations and/or taxpayer votes. Consequently, all those enhancing and desirable supplemental aspects of education that were longed for during the years of increasing enrollment periods and expanding school facilities, will also be denied and impossible in the years of decline. With ever increasing costs and fewer student numbers, the general fund budgets in most

school systems are caught in an impossible crunch. One must remember, administrators and boards of education are rapidly becoming accustomed to cutting programs and laying-off personnel. Consequently, high quality programs of vocational agriculture serving the local needs will be evaluated and scrutinized in the days ahead in a very severe manner. What evidence do we have that we are good, efficient and effective? Schools may not tolerate mediocrity. Will vocational agricultural program endure these challenges? Are we using the proper evidence as we establish national standards? What kind of locking mechanism will the national standards have on programs?

One may ask the question, is the worth of the school curriculum being valued largely by the criterion of dollars? Without money and increasing amounts of money, schools are extremely limited in the amount of program development that can and will be undertaken. Therefore, it seems realistic to say that money is a primary criterion in determining the value of content in the school curriculum.

Will the recently developed national standards for secondary and post-secondary levels of instruction form important criteria for evaluating vocational agriculture programs? Criteria and standards have been established for the curriculum areas of production agriculture, agricultural supplies and services, agricultural mechanics, agricultural products processing, ornamental horticulture, agriculture (natural) resources and forestry. Also, the areas of administration and supervision, teacher education, and young farmer and other adult education now have national criteria and standards established.

In this discussion, one must also ask, where does the *Evaluative Criteria* of the National Study of Secondary School Evaluation fit in this era of school and program evaluation? This guide for secondary school evaluation, published in 1940, with revisions in 1950, 1960, 1969, and now, 1977, has been used by schools throughout the United States as a basis for self-study. Certain regional accrediting organizations have used it as a tool in attaining or maintaining accreditation.

The following statement is found in each edition of the *Evaluative Criteria*:

The Study has developed a proved way of recognizing that schools which are quite different may be equally good. This involves the basic principle that a school should be evaluated in terms of what it is striving to accomplish (its philosophy and objectives) and in terms of the extent to which it is meeting the needs of the students who are enrolled or for whom it is responsible...

The evaluations resulting from the use of the materials and procedures recommended by the National Study of Secondary School Evaluation may be considered as ratios of accomplishment where the quality and nature of work done in a school are related to what should be done to satisfy the philosophy and objectives of the school and the needs of the youth who are or should be served by the school. This does not make the evaluation of secondary schools a simple task; but, at least, it establishes a sound basis for such an evaluation.⁴

An examination of the agriculture section of the *Evaluative Criteria* revealed that the following statement is made as one guiding principal in evaluating a vocational agriculture program:

Vocational-technical instruction in agriculture should effectively and efficiently lead interested youth and adults to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities that provide preparatory education for purposeful employment and supplementary education for advancement in agriculture and agriculture-related occupations.⁵

The *National Criteria and Standards* for Vocational Agriculture provide a checklist for guiding curriculum workers in establishing programs in one of the seven areas or evaluating programs in terms of the specific standards outlined. A comparison of the *Evaluative Criteria* and the *National Criteria and Standards*⁶ revealed the following differences in format and subsequent evaluation emphasis:

Evaluative Criteria

- Guiding Principles Instructions
 - I Organization
 - II Nature of Offerings
 - III Physical Facilities
 - IV Direction of Learning
 - V Outcomes
 - VI Special Characteristics
 - VII General Evaluation

National Standards

- Administration and Super-Vision
- Finance
- Staffing
- Facilities and Equipment
- Instructional Program
- Student Recruitment, Enrollment and Counseling
- Leadership Development
- Occupational Experience
- Placement
- Evaluation
- Public Relations

A review of the two documents revealed that the *National Standards and Criteria* contain very specific information regarding vocational agriculture programs whereas the *Evaluative Criteria* contain a few rather specific statements regarding program specifications, but, in general tend to focus on a broad guiding principles approach to program (process) evaluation. The *National Criteria and Standards* deal with very specific and factual information in 11 categories but also tend to focus on the process of how to get the teaching job accomplished.

Since the field of vocational agriculture now has national standards, what are the promises and the threats?

Promises - One promise which seems to be immediately evident is the impact of a national standard. Whenever a criteria carries national status it has an immediate and unquestioned influence on decision-makers. Consequently, when a school is not 'in-line' with a national standard, a considerable amount of pressure for making change is implied.

A second promise is that programs across the country may begin to reflect similarity on a national basis. Since federal monies are spent on programs, it seems reasonable that they be expended in a similar manner in each state and all Americans regardless of economics, social, cultural or racial factors will receive similar opportunities and experience. Possibly a national strengthening of the vital supervised occupational experience program will be a reality.

Threats - First of all, the threat of any national standard is the stifling of creativity and innovativeness of local educators. Agriculture teachers have always been adept at developing new and unique programs for local people at the local level. A national standard may totally remove that ability.

Secondly, control over programming may be removed from the local scene and placed in the hands of national program standard writers. Local control today has eroded to the place whereby local educators are merely manipulated voiceless patrons. Frequently, a faceless someone in higher places of state or federal government really makes the important decisions. These decisions seem to be made with blatant disregard for unique differences inherent in local communities and the school. The threat of compliance or 'we'll stop funding' emerges as the only alternative.

A third threat is that an attitude of indifference to matters of vocational agriculture may occur in a local community. The whole implication of 'this is what is required so don't question, shake-the-boat or whatever!' It is neat to administer so let's not change it, it is also a clever maneuver of policy makers.

Consequently, the implementation of the *National Criteria and Standards* can pose a real threat or they hold promise for a better vocational agriculture experience for students. The *Evaluative Criteria* do not impose a threat but tend to reflect in a general way, via the self-study, the strengths and weaknesses of a vocational agricultural program. Consequently, the field of Vocational Agriculture has three nationally recognized evaluation mechanisms than can be used to up-grade programs and/or stimulate teachers and administrators to make comparisons with the nationally established standards. It may be well to remember that the three devices have totally different purposes. The nationally standardized Agricultural Achievement Test measures individual and group principles that reflect strengths and weaknesses in a program as a result of a self-examination and a visitation teams' analysis of a program. The *National Criteria and Standards* provide a checklist of program to a national criterion. The *National Criteria and Standards* may be used by supervisory personnel to up-grade local programs. However, a standard has minimal worth in terms of experiences for students if there is not a commitment to support it financially. The era of mandated programs is rapidly losing passive acceptance by administrators who are locked into a financial dilemma. The imposing of standards can have a negative backlash if not carefully administered by the profession. Finally, As Dr. R. Paul Marvin so frequently states... 'if an evaluation does not result in change or reflect change it really is not worth doing.'

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