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The FFA: A Positive or Negative Future Depends By Roland Peterson

The 62nd National FFA Convention was another impressive event in the history of agricultural education. Sixty-two times this gathering has attracted the attention of students from America and around the world, agricultural leaders, U.S. Presidents, Presidential cabinet members, aspiring Presidents, federal legislators, prominent sports heroes, renowned inspirational and motivational speakers, clergy, beauty queens, public education leaders plus the highest officials in all of the major agricultural businesses in this country, many from other countries as well. Every year this scene is repeated as the "cream of American youth interested in agriculture" put themselves on display. When nearly 24,000 secondary students and guests flood Kansas City, Missouri, one cannot be anything but deeply impressed with the event.

A few highlights of the 62nd Convention reflect on those events and activities. First of all, Mr. Nick Babson, Chairman of Babson Bros. Co./SURGE and the 1989 FFA Foundation Sponsoring Board announced a record setting fund raising total of \$3,720,000 had been raised voluntarily from businesses and individuals to support the goals and programs of the FFA. One cannot help but be impressed to see the action of businesses and individuals as they invest in the youth of America. Some might suggest that business ought to give more, however, 20-25 million dollars over a 5-6 year period is a substantial contribution. The agricultural education profession should be grateful and the world impressed with this level of monetary support. The young people at the FFA Convention display a level of enthusiasm for agriculture which should be heard around the world. It is

impossible to attend one of the convention sessions and not become excited about the future of American agriculture. When one observes thousands of youth gathered, focused and "on-fire" for agriculture, it is impossible to sit passively in the audience. The convention program is varied. Ideas about agriculture and life itself are shared by an impressive cadre of outstanding speakers. As the National Chorus sends a thrill through the audience with a powerful rendition only to be followed by a stirring number from the National Band, one is on an emotional high. It is clear that the central focus of the convention is agriculture. The program reflects a broad spectrum of activities under the vast range of opportunities provided by agriculture. National contest and award programs cover content from livestock evaluation, crop production, farm management, business management, forestry, natural resources, horticulture, mechanics, dairy food products, and the environment. Content is augmented by the focus on music, speaking, drama and an impressive career planning show. An investment of nearly \$4 million is made in the lives of FFA members. It is clear that very important executives in American and international agribusiness must recognize quality in this program.

In walking away from the 62nd Convention several messages kept coming to my mind. One impression came via a young lady from Florida who apparently joined the National Chorus a couple of years ago. She clearly won the hearts of convention goers. She certainly had a gifted voice. Apparently, she joined the chorus without the ability to read music. However, when given an opportunity to perform as a soloist singing "The Wind

Beneath My Wings" she thrilled every person in the packed audience. She brought the house down. Yes, agriculture provided her with an unforgettable experience. One might wonder who sings in the National FFA Chorus. A brief review of the student members reveals that students come from both very small and very large communities. The key issue is that they were given an opportunity to perform. They could display their talents and abilities before a national audience in full glow of spotlights and headlines. Agriculture served as the common bond that brought them all together and gave them a rich opportunity. No one seemed to worry if the Music Department or the Agriculture Department had provided the music education. The point was that students were most important. Consequently students were given an educational experience in music in the context of agriculture.

When one listens to the critics of youth and education today, it seems they are targeting their criticism on poor performance in the fundamentals of academics and life adjustment. Goodlad's (1984) study of schools identified the lack of student and parent interest plus drug and alcohol use as school problems of most concern to parents, students and teachers.

In the Carnegie Forum report entitled A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century (1986), it was stated that the 1980s will be remembered as beginning a massive reassessment of the basis of the nation's economic strength and the quality of education. The focus on schools comes from a widely perceived decline in the quality of American education. Goodlad (1984) stated that American schools are in trouble. School problems are so severe, many schools may not survive. He suggested several premises to consider in addressing this national concern or criticism. First, we have not outgrown the need for schools. Secondly, schools as we have known them, may not be the ones appropriate for this era. Thirdly, criticism of schools lacks proper diagnosis required for reconstruction.

Society seems to place the responsibility of a declining quality

education directly on the schools. It also seems that the responsibility for fixing the problem rests directly on the schools. A review of professional seminars and workshops show the following topics being addressed: Teaching for transfer, approaches to solving the at-risk problem, student motivation, cognitive development, learning styles, selecting curriculum content, teaching thinking, reshaping the curriculum and global perspectives. Schools are in trouble. Quality education is being challenged. Restructuring of the schools is a popular movement today. Everyone seems to offer solutions. Everyone seems to be attempting to focus on developing students who can think and solve every day life problems.

In thinking back on the 62nd National FFA Convention, one is left with a feeling that we were watching a cruel hoax unfold. Why? Because it is clearly evident that as these young people returned to their schools, their agricultural education program would be regarded by many of their school administrators, school boards, school counselors, school faculty and the general public as a "fluff" program that is out-of-touch with the 1990s. According to many curriculum planners, agricultural education serves only a few students interested in farming. They hold a position that there is little demand for a program that serves such a narrow field. Furthermore, if one points to the fact that teachers of agriculture can appropriately concentrate on teaching concepts of science and biotechnology, administrators, other teachers and licensing officials will state that teachers of agriculture are unqualified to teach highly technical content. Consequently, all of the enthusiasm generated at the National FFA Convention is quickly "doused" at the local and state levels. That is a cruel way for a program with a legitimate role in the schools of America, and the students who profit from its activities, to be treated. The program has focused on students first. Who taught the music, the science, the mathematics was not the issue. Teachers of agriculture put content into a meaningful context.

Why is something so impressive in

motivating students and equipping them with a vast array of general education exit outcomes so easily dismissed? Developing a positive self-concept, contributing to cognitive development, producing self-directed learners, providing experiences that develop social process skills such as decision making - problem solving - teamwork and communications and a concern for others are the hallmarks of agricultural education. They should not be expendable! To achieve these outcomes requires the integration of all aspects of education. According to Spady (1989), outcome based education is a "way of doing business." It affects every aspect of the schooling process. Spady (1989) suggested one key aspect is the focus on outcomes of significance as definers and framers of the curriculum. Outcome-based education is more than courses. It is a focus on performance standards rather than a schedule of performance. Agricultural education has never developed its programs in isolation. It has always used other aspects of the school. If one but reviews the events that were on display in Kansas City, it is clearly evident that the fine arts (music), the language arts (speaking, reading and writing), the social sciences (Building Our American Communities - farm management), and the sciences and mathematics are deeply embedded in the activities of agriculture programs.

Agricultural education certainly provides a context for subject matter content. In addition, the development of higher order thinking skills (cognitive development) is embedded in every contest. When students are placed in a contest situation that requires them to select the best animal, crop, meat product, poultry product, dairy product or analyze a forestry or a horticulture situation, they are functioning at the highest cognitive levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. They are required to think, to process and call upon all of their knowledge and experience in making complex decisions.

In addition, the degree and proficiency award programs allow students to work and develop their abilities on a personal or individual basis. Students are allowed an opportunity to develop

their abilities to the fullest extent of all mental, economic and physical resources available to them.

So, why are agriculture programs being reduced or eliminated? Why are the so called comprehensive schools taking such a narrow view of meeting the exit outcomes expected of students? It is clearly evident that any education with a real-life, practical or experiential focus has never earned a respected place in the school setting. It really doesn't matter if the discipline of agriculture provides a context for meeting learner exit outcomes. It really doesn't matter if agricultural experiences "turn on" kids. It really doesn't matter if those experiences of working with live animals (horses, cats, dogs, birds, fish, beef, dairy, sheep, hogs or poultry), animal products (meat, milk, eggs), crops (vegetables, fruits, cereal grains, fiber, oil and specialties), horticulture, floriculture, wildlife and the natural resources make all of education meaningful. It seems that those in positions of curriculum planning and school administration and finance simply write-off the program as expendable. This paper is not advancing the argument that agricultural education is the only program in a school. The argument is that agriculture is a process and provides a context for learning that makes the whole of education rich and meaningful to many kids. It is clear that 62 years of having the FFA demonstrate the dynamic experiences it provides young people, really does not count or have value when decisions as to where the focus of schooling will center. A recent publication of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) edited by Jacobs (1989) focused on the theme of interdisciplinary curriculum design and implementation. She pointed out that with knowledge growing at exponential proportions in all areas, the curriculum planner must wrestle with the question of what should be taught and what should be eliminated. She also suggested that fragmented schedules, due to the demands on schools, to address all of the ills of society continually take time away from teaching. Further, she addressed the question of the relevance of the

curriculum. She pointed out that nationally 25% of the students drop out every year. She stated:

"A common concern of students is the relevance of their coursework in their lives out of school. They find it difficult to understand why they need math when most of their instruction is based on a textbook used in isolation from application."

Jacobs (1989) suggested that all subjects are generally taught in blocks of time during the school day. She stated that life is not divided into knowledge fields. Relationships between fields must be demonstrated to students. Finally, she pointed out the problems of training people in a specialization and then expecting them to cope with a multifaceted work situation.

Jacobs identified the key issue facing schools. However, it is very revealing to observe, in later chapters of the book, the manner she proposed to address the interdisciplinary curriculum issues. Her example reflected the real story as to why agricultural education has difficulty gaining any respect in the schools. In every illustration she used to reflect the interdisciplinary development of a unit, NEVER ONCE was any experiential-oriented discipline suggested as part of the model. She suggested mathematics, language arts, social studies, science, humanities and philosophy, but never a discipline with an experiential tinge. Clearly, experiential-oriented disciplines in education bring the "application" and "real world" dimension to the curriculum. However, that concept is not in the mind-set of those who design curriculum. It would be interesting and refreshing to see the primary thrust of the interdisciplinary curriculum focused under the headlines of agriculture, home and family living, business management, marketing, transportation, construction, and communication with the academic disciplines buried and applied in each real-life field.

The interdisciplinary program on display at the 62nd National FFA Convention is obviously not recognized on the merits of the meaningful and valuable experiences they provide students. This mentality is clearly reflected in a

University of Minnesota admissions publication that clearly states courses taken in agriculture, horticulture and natural resource management will not be considered as meeting the requirements of science units suggested for new incoming students.

Consequently, despite years of clearly demonstrating integration and an interdisciplinary curriculum plus the practice of using higher order thinking skills in agricultural settings and FFA programs, few curriculum planners give this program any real value in the lives of students. Even after 62 years of giving a clear demonstration of its implementation, few seem to be impressed. Why does this situation exist? Few outside of the profession have been convinced that an agricultural education program can have a valuable contribution to make to all students.

Agricultural education and the FFA have an impressive record with an emphasis on teaching students as the first and foremost responsibility. However, few outside the agricultural education community see the merits of the program. Few give much merit to agricultural education as an interdisciplinary process. As a profession it is time to take charge of our destiny! The kids at the 62nd Convention are a clear testimony of the quality of an interdisciplinary, integrated program. Whether the future of the FFA will be positive or negative depends on the level of creativity and enthusiasm with which the agricultural education professionals address the situation. The total Agricultural Education program has too many excellent qualities to ignore or allow to die. We need to rewrite the books. We need to experiment with programs to position those programs so that a greater portion of the school population can benefit from the richness an agricultural education program brings to the school.

Now a word to the profession,

Why are we such an unknown entity in the school system apart from the display in Kansas City? Do we ever really inform anyone of the connections we make to the rest of the curriculum in the school. Do we ever inform anyone of the many times we apply principles of biology, physics and chemistry to real life problems. Do

we ever show the mathematical concepts we apply to agricultural problems. Do we inform the school administration and board when we report our activities of the communications skills students have applied or the vast array of fine arts experiences we have incorporated into the agricultural education program?

Agricultural education has a rich history of providing an interdisciplinary experience for kids. The future can be positive, it really all depends.

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