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SOME ISSUES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

by

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Much has been said about vocational education in recent months. In fact, vocational education seems to have replaced life adjustment and reading as the whipping boy of public education. It has become common practice to lump all federally reimbursed vocational programs into one category and to speak of them as a single program. The various programs of vocational education are different in as many ways as they are alike. To be sure there is a common dedication to training for useful work in the homes, factories, offices, industries, businesses, and on the farms of America. The principles basic to this philosophy are shared by all. Yet the programs are quite different in operation.

Trade and industrial education, for example, prepares people to perform specific skills in specific occupations such as drill press operators or typesetters. To date trade and industrial education is largely a post-high school program. Distributive education trains for sales and service jobs within specific job classifications. Home economics education treats the basic occupation of homemaking as a vocation in itself. The only training in budgeting, household accounting, child care and home management most modern brides get is their high school home economics course. Industrial arts has professed a general education classification and minimizes vocational purpose, yet it has inherent vocational outcomes that cannot be denied.

Vocational agriculture, in common with all sound vocational education, has insisted always that theory and practice occur together in training people of all ages. It shares with home economics and trade and industrial education a major responsibility for adult education. It likewise has an integral role in the high school curricula. Every high school student of vocational agriculture carries out a program of supervised work experience in cooperation with his parents and teacher. Thus, close working relationships between the home and the school; the boy, his parents and teacher are

the *sine quo non* of vocational agriculture and constitute one of its most distinguishing characteristics. Such a learning-teaching situation enhances the opportunity for effective and realistic guidance which has been a hallmark of vocational agriculture through the years. It provides a basis for an expanded, more comprehensive, training program at the high school level. The motto of the Future Farmers of America "learning to do, doing to learn, earning to live, living to serve" is not a collection of idle phrases; it is a guideline for an instructional program.

Considerable attention has been given in recent months to population shifts and the decimation of the farm population, although the trend from farm to city has been going on since the industrial revolution. At the same time some studies have shown that the farm youth is poorly trained to compete with his city-born counterpart for jobs. This is undoubtedly true in certain cases, but, like the book *Tobacco Road*, it lacks considerably of being the whole truth.

It has been suggested that because of the trend toward larger, higher capitalized farm businesses and the subsequent reduction in the number of persons required to operate them that there should be a corresponding reduction in vocational education in agriculture. This is not only ridiculous, but dangerous. It shows an inclination to yield to the temptation of attacking a symptom rather than a cause. This situation is due to many factors not the least of which has been a lack of vocational education opportunity in rural areas. To suggest that there is too much emphasis on vocational agriculture seems to be a negative approach. The trend toward fewer and larger business units in agriculture is in harmony with the general trend in other businesses, industries, and indeed, in school districts. It is a function of technology and is not to be deplored except insofar as educational opportunity has failed to keep pace with need. Shall we

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conclude that because we now have fewer school administrative units we should give less emphasis to training school superintendents? We have fewer airline corporations; fewer retail grocery companies, fewer bank corporations now than we had a few years ago, but this trend toward mergers and consolidation of units seems a poor reason for withdrawing educational resources. Reducing the share of educational resources allocated to agriculture in order to increase support of other valuable vocational programs implies that robbing Peter to pay Paul will raise the average. This is a superficial approach to a problem of grave import. The basic problem is to allocate adequate resources to vocational education adapted to the needs of rural youth.

It is statistically possible to project the trend in declining farm population and name the year in which there will be no more farms. The same kind of projection can be made statistically to show that the advancing average age of farm operators will one day result in century-old farmers. Such uses of statistics are not very helpful in solving the problems of rural youth. Too many of the recent rash of statements about vocational education have relied on this type of analysis. The first requisite of an industrial economy is the ability to produce efficiently. Manufacturing, processing, marketing and distribution are all dependent on this. To relegate vocational agriculture to a secondary role will limit the contributions of all vocational education.

Dr. Karl Shoemaker of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (1) in an address at the 1961 Agricultural Outlook Conference suggested that one farm boy in ten could expect to find opportunity to operate a farm business grossing \$10,000 annually. This ratio depends on the acceptance of certain

assumptions carefully postulated by Dr. Shoemaker. The one in ten statistic has since been used by writers of popular articles to "prove" that too large a share of the education dollar has been devoted to agricultural education in the public schools. The Congress provided \$13.6 million for vocational agriculture in fiscal 1963; during this same period the funds allocated for agricultural experiment stations were \$36.5 million and for the agricultural extension service of the U. S. Department of Agriculture the amount was \$70.6 million (2). One may raise the question as to whether \$13 million for agricultural education in the public schools is, in fact, nearly enough to provide a basic vocational education program in rural areas. Rapid increases in Federal expenditures for agricultural experiment stations and extension service have accelerated the development and availability of new information and procedures. Systematic vocational instruction is essential to the application and utilization of this new knowledge.

The number of farm businesses in the United States has been steadily declining in recent years. This has been accompanied by migration to the cities of farm youth. In fact, the supply of farm males apparently has been decreasing at a more rapid rate than the number of farm business units. According to figures from the United States Census the number of farms per 18-year-old farm males has increased sharply.

Table 1

Number of Farms and 18-Year-Old Farm Males in United States, 1940-1960

Year	No. of Farms	No. of 18-year-old Farm Males	Ratio of Farms to Males
1940	6,069,799	367,752	16.5
1950	5,388,437	221,259	24.4
1960	3,710,503	118,470	31.3

Source: United States Census Reports

Table 1 suggests that the relative opportunity to become established in farming may be brighter now than in the past for those who remain in their home communities. Drabick (3) reports that in North Carolina about half of the male senior population of the high schools expressed intent to leave the community. The difference between vocational agriculture students and other students was not significantly different. This

further illuminates the challenge facing vocational education in rural high schools as patterns are evolved to meet an increasing variety of needs.

It is commonly accepted that the large amount of capital required to operate a modern farm poses an almost insurmountable obstacle to a rural youth desirous of entering this occupation. It is true that farm businesses require large amounts of capital. Yet young men are entering the occupation with relatively modest capital investment on their part. In two Minnesota communities (4, 5), the average amount of capital owned by young men starting farming in the past ten years amounted to \$3,526 and \$4,932. The fact that these young men were able to achieve responsibility for the operation and management of a farm business unit with limited capital of their own suggests the need of an educational program emphasizing the development of management and business analysis ability. This is a function of a vocational education program in any high school serving rural people. Such a program will match environment and education; teach commitment to work; provide opportunity to earn, save and invest; and encourage self-reliance which should not be mistaken for smug stolidity or low aspiration.

Needed Programs

Testimony presented to both the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States indicates that responsible leaders of vocational education are unanimous in their judgment (6). They have recommended that present programs be broadened and expanded, that new programs in such areas as office occupations be included in the cooperatively supported federal-state-local programs, and that area vocational schools play a larger role in vocational education.

In this merging pattern two specific developments seem certain. First, home economics instruction will greatly extend its training program for gainful occupations involving home economics skills and knowledge. Shopping services for residents of rest homes, buyers aides, home care, substitute mothers for working wives with small children, and the whole range of food services illustrate the types of training to be given added special attention.

Second, vocational agriculture will move to give special attention to the so-called

agribusiness occupations and at the same time greatly step up adult education using the farm business analysis approach. A third development in vocational agriculture will be increased attention to the process by which qualified young men and women become established in farming and related agricultural occupations. Apprentice-type programs in agribusiness occupations will operate side by side with the present programs. The high school classes and the Future Farmers of America will continue to play a major role in introducing young men to the wide and wonderful world of modern agriculture.

Home economics and agriculture will continue to be significant vocational programs for rural America. Homemaking and home economics occupations are basic to strong family units. Farming is now, and will probably continue to be the largest single entrepreneurial opportunity in most of the United States and certainly in rural America. In the welter of change it must be remembered that agribusiness depends on a system of well managed profitable family farms. Without well trained farm operators the entire structure of agribusiness will come down like a house of cards.

Table 2

Sole Proprietorships, Partnerships and Corporations in the United States, 1959

KIND OF BUSINESS	SOLE	PARTNER-	CORP.	TOTAL
	PROP.	SHIP		
	(thousands)			
Farming	3359	126	(n.a.)	3485
Wholesale and retail trade	2010	304	335	2649
Services	1980	160	110	2250
Finance, insurance, real estate	447	185	319	951
Construction . . .	646	67	66	779
Manufacturing ..	187	48	156	391
Transportation and communication	284	18	43	345
Mining	34	13	13	60

Source: U.S Bureau of the Census "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1962" Table 646, p. 488.

The need for expanded and broadened vocational education in the high schools is recognized in legislation recently passed by the Congress (7). This legislation, H.R.

4955, provides specifically for the use of Federal funds at the discretion of State Boards for Vocational Education in broadened programs of agriculture, home economics, trade and industrial and distributive education. It also provides support for business and office occupational training.

In the immediate future the need for vocational education may be more acute in cities than in rural areas. The cities are in crisis. Care must be exercised that this need is met without prejudice to the continuing need for expanded vocational education in the broad reaches of rural America. Rural youth, the future producers of food, fiber and forest products for the world are important keys to lasting progress, not only for rural areas, but for our cities as well.

No vocational education program can succeed without carefully selected and well prepared teachers. This is a function and responsibility of colleges and universities, especially land grant institutions and state universities. They are the fountainhead of the professional growth and development of teachers, supervisors, and administrators. In them resides also the primary responsibility for research and for its interpretation and dissemination. Vocational education departments in higher education institutions must be more than a contractual relationship with State Boards for Vocational Education. Theirs is the responsibility, in large measure, for developing vocational education for rural America as a discipline worthy of the respect of all by virtue of its own merit and the dignity of useful work.

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