

DISTINGUISHED LECTURE

The Distinguished Lecture has traditionally been a highlight of the annual AATEA breakfast meeting held during the Convention of the American Vocational Association. *The Journal* is used as a means of providing a written record of the Lecture and to give wide dissemination of it within the profession. The Distinguished Lecture for 1976 was presented on December 7, 1976, at the Convention in Houston, Texas.

AN OVER THE SHOULDER LOOK AT THE CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY AND STANDARDS IN VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE

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It is a distinct pleasure for me to have the opportunity to be in this capacity this morning. I am particularly honored when I look back and review the names of the individuals who have appeared in this position in the past. I can remember as a graduate student reading the materials presented by the AATEA "Mystery Speakers." Little did I realize at that time that I would have the opportunity of assuming the same role as that distinguished group of leaders in agricultural education.

It has become somewhat of a tradition that persons appearing in this capacity can expose the personal biases that they have accumulated over their years of involvement with vocational agriculture. Not wanting to break with tradition, I will take this opportunity to present some of my biases that I have assembled in my 27 years of association with vocational agriculture.

As we celebrate our bicentennial, it seems appropriate to review the accomplishments of agriculture and more specifically

vocational agriculture. The famous farmer who held more high public offices than any other individual and whose brilliant mind and love of freedom generated our Declaration of Independence once said, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God." Thomas Jefferson was proud of his agricultural heritage and resolved never to wear any other character except that of a farmer.

On the corner of 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. stands The National Archives Building which houses our great historical documents. Two signs flank the entrance of this building and spell out a message to successive generations of Americans. The sign on the left says "Study the Past," while the sign on the right says, "What is Past is Prologue."

To study the past, let us look at what has happened to agriculture over the past few years. Our farm population has declined but our production capacity has increased. One farmer now produces enough food and fiber to feed 56 persons. The capacity and importance of "the American agriculture system" is receiving more attention on both the domestic and international scene than ever before.

Vocational education is receiving more attention and financial support than it ever has. Enrollments in vocational agriculture are larger than they have ever been. New programs are being initiated at a fast pace. Yes, we have many indicators to lead us to believe that never before has the future of vocational agriculture been so bright. I share the optimism with many of you in terms of the future of vocational agriculture.

Although it is enlightening to "study the past" we cannot continue to turn back the pages of time anymore than we can unring a bell. It is the future that holds the promise and that is what I wish to discuss with you this morning.

There is a present trend in our field to examine our philosophy and the basic standards on which programs are developed. I feel this is an excellent movement and one which can have far reaching impact on the future of vocational agriculture. The National Seminar for Updating Criteria and Standards and the recently developed statement of philosophy of vocational agriculture are examples of this current trend. I am also encouraged by the programs and seminars sponsored by many of the states and regions which have dealt with philosophy and program standards.

My following remarks are centered on looking at the basic philosophy and standards on which programs are developed. It

is not my attempt to slaughter any sacred cows, step on any toes or offend anyone. However, when discussing philosophy I am sure some of you will not agree with my biases even to the point of getting upset. If this is the case, I will consider my objective being met since hopefully it will cause all of us to re-examine our basic beliefs. It has been said that every important activity has a basis in theory. Honest people cannot divorce their actions in or toward anything from what they believe about it. Those who hold erroneous beliefs about something are usually erroneous in their actions toward it. Dr. Melvin Barlow, writing in The 1974 AVA Yearbook, reminded us of the following: "It is important to draw a distinction between basic philosophical foundations and convenient administrative decisions. The former are stable and the later are more transient in quality." And I would add the later are less defensible on a sound educational basis.

Standards which grow out of anything other than a sound philosophical base and defensible educational principles can lead only to further prejudices and emotional reactions from those who are regulated by the standards. For a variety of reasons (mostly financial and personal convenience) we have lost sight of the basic philosophical concepts of vocational education. As a result the standards by which we evaluate local programs have failed to protect the integrity and basic purposes of vocational education.

Although we have had tremendous growth in vocational agriculture in recent years, I seriously question whether the quality of programs has kept up with the growth. It is my contention that many programs have ignored basic quality standards for the simple purpose of enrollment of more students. Many of us lay blame to school administrators and others who because of greed, dishonesty, lack of knowledge of the purpose of vocational education or whatever feel that we should serve the college-bound student first and that vocational education should be "All Things to All People."

The root cause, as Alice Widener so aptly put it, is our snobbish, impractical, intellectually dishonest and misguided educational system. You may agree with her and say that is true of "them." However I feel she is also talking about "us." I feel it is much more serious, for like Florence Nightingale said, "There is nothing worse than a nurse who spreads disease in a hospital." I would like to add a bit to Florence's quote by saying "Unless it is a vocational educator who compromises his standards for the sake of enrollment or pressure from academicians."

I feel we all need to re-examine our philosophy for the purpose of clarifying what it is we believe about vocational agriculture. For only as long as we have sound beliefs will we have sound actions.

A good many years ago Charles A. Prosser proposed 16 Theorems of Vocational Education as a creed for vocational educators. I am sure that you have read these basic principles of Vocational Education so I will not repeat them today. I will suggest, however, that it would be a good exercise to review these basic principles, for I feel that they are just as appropriate today as they were 30 years ago. I would like to suggest that some of the present practices in vocational agriculture be evaluated in light of these principles.

A review of some changes in vocational agriculture over the past few years has led me to question whether these new developments are really within the basic purposes of vocational agriculture. If what is being said in our own professional journal, *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, is any indication of what is actually being practiced then perhaps we who tend to be somewhat conservative and traditional in our philosophy have cause to become alarmed. A review of our literature, discussions with teachers and attendance at various meetings has enabled me to submit the following quotations to illustrate my point:

1. "With rare exceptions, agricultural educators have tended to concentrate their efforts on those students who could win the largest number of awards or activities."
2. "Vocational agriculture must assume the leadership role in career education."
3. "Vo-Ag students should write more themes so they will be more successful when they go to college."
4. "One of the primary goals of our post-secondary agriculture program is to give the student the necessary academic background to succeed in a four-year college program."
5. "We have expanded our curriculum to include 42 separate distinct courses. This has been a big help to the student who wants a little agriculture and plans to go to college."
6. "We have redesigned our curriculum so that students can complete the requirements for a college prep degree and also take vocational agriculture!"

7. "Over 50% of our students who take vocational agriculture go on to college."
8. "We must make vocational education more academic and academic education more vocational."
9. "We must eliminate the dualism between vocational and general education."

I could go on and speak about such changes as taking vocational out of the instructor's title, out of the program title and, yes, even out of the state department's title. I personally think that the word "vocational" has no stigma attached to it and we should stop kidding ourselves and others by trying to be all things to all people.

As we think about what we believe, there has to be something wrong with an educational system that spends over 90 cents out of every dollar to make sure that the twenty percent who are going to college will do well.

Philosophers have told us that educational programs generally choose between one of three orientations:

1. knowledge for the sake of knowledge
2. social purpose, and
3. self improvement.

Do you ever wonder what is in store for a nation that neglects eighty percent of its population to assure that the remaining twenty percent will have the "knowledge for the sake of knowledge" necessary to succeed in college? We have all wondered what's wrong with a system which: made 100 million Germans cheer Hitler; made 200 million Russians revere Stalin; or made millions of Americans condone Nixon. But is that worse than a system which condones the misuse of vocational resources and rewards vocational teachers who send many of their students to college, or win many contests and awards, but place very few of their graduates in occupations for which they were trained?

One of the most noteworthy traditions of vocational agriculture is its emphasis on a core of professionally trained teachers. In the final analysis it is the expertise and basic beliefs of the teacher that determine the direction and success of the local program. If this is the case, then we as teacher educators, can play a vital role in influencing the standards of local programs. But, as one teacher said to me, "teacher

educators have egg on their faces, too." Why is it you told us as future teachers that vocational agriculture students should be prepared for gainful employment in jobs at less than the baccalaureate level and one of the first things you do is try to recruit my better students for college? Or, that one of the primary factors to consider in determining whether a program is successful is the percentage of students placed in agricultural occupations, but when you pick student teaching centers you look at success in the FFA, the physical facility, the number of awards received, etc., and don't even consider what is happening to the graduates of the program. Perhaps we have been a bit hypocritical and we in teacher education should be the first group of agricultural educators to re-examine our beliefs and practices.

One area that we may begin to look at is the books and literature that we utilize in training teachers. Upon review of the listed objectives of vocational agriculture I was amazed to find most texts place great emphasis upon the general education values but for the most part fail to mention the primary objective of placement for employment.

Since I may be getting close to some "sacred cows," let me risk attacking something that is sacred to all of us--the FFA. I feel that the only defensible reason for any youth organization is the enhancement of learning in the vocational program. A review of the aims and purposes of the FFA reveals nothing about this important role. Perhaps we have placed too much emphasis in the FFA on training mayors, councilmen, legislators, governors, and congressmen and too little emphasis in evaluating the success of the FFA in the percentage of past members employed in agriculture at less than the college level. It would be interesting to find out how many of our past National FFA officers are employed in agricultural related jobs that don't require a college degree.

When teachers determine what they should incorporate into their curriculum they face the problem of what to include and what to eliminate. This could be further boiled down to determining what skills and abilities are needed to succeed in the occupation and what things are nice to know. I contend that we should base our program standards on what we need to know and let general education assume the responsibility for the nice to know things. This is not to say that general education is not necessary for success in vocational education. I am only reaffirming my position that we can not be all things to all people.

As vocational agriculture continues to expand, the need for sound, uniform standards increases. It is hard to under-

stand why some states require specific standards for class time, teacher qualifications, facilities, equipment and many other factors while other states have few or no standards at all. Perhaps the reason that some programs have no identifiable program standards is that they have not identified their basic philosophy.

I feel program standards are an absolute necessity if we are to describe and protect quality. We in higher education are also concerned with standards, quality and unity in education. Some of you may have read a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "It's Time to Re-read Robert M. Hutchins." For you few who are not familiar with Dr. Hutchins, he is the liberal educator who believes experience and practical application should be left to life and we should set about our task of intellectual training. Hutchins, in his book *The Learned Society*, proposes that colleges must develop the intellectual skills to make young men and women employable twenty-five years after graduation. Needless to say, vocationalism is one of Hutchins' main enemies.

If we would follow Hutchin's logic, standards would not need to exist for any segment of education. School officials could develop programs for all people. However, history has shown that educators, like other public officials, react to pressure and since these pressures range from that exerted by politicians to the band mother's club, it becomes apparent that vocational education must use other means to counteract these pressures. We have used such measures as categorical funding, but it too will fail unless sound standards and regulations are present.

Many persons argue today that standards prescribed at any level are unnecessary and in most cases undesirable if prescribed at any level higher than their own. Classroom teachers claim that the classroom is their domain and we in higher education have for many years hidden behind a false halo called "academic freedom." State governments have said "give us a 'block grant' we know what's best for our state," and local districts complain about state interference. However, I contend that if any program is to be held accountable (and I think that all must be), only with realistic and sound standards can this be done.

To explain why we appear to have a deterioration of standards in vocational agriculture would only be conjecture on my part. However, the following developments could be contributing factors:

1. The continued effort to ignore the need for leadership in agricultural education at the national and regional level.
2. The decline in quality and quantity of leadership at the state level due to the assignment of reduced authority and visability to vocational directors by chief state school officers.
3. The general trend to place more emphasis on the related and supportive areas of vocational education, with a resulting de-emphasis on the basic subject. The recently passed Federal Act further emphasizes this trend that started with the 1963 Act and the 1968 Amendments. Traditionally, agricultural education and vocational education have substituted legislation for a viable educational philosophy.
4. The growth of vocational education has greatly expanded the vocational education "family." Many of these new vocational educators have a limited background and lack a sound philosophy of vocational education.
5. Too many vocational educators try to justify standards by the classic response, "because it's in the state plan," instead of defending it on a sound educational basis.

In conclusion, let me say that there isn't a standard as important as the reason for it. If we can't agree on the reason, there is no need to try to agree on the standard. If we are really concerned about the future and destiny of vocational agriculture, then we must be concerned about the standards.

I am optimistic about the future of vocational education and vocational agriculture. I am also convinced that teacher education in agriculture can, and will play a vital role in shaping the future destiny of these programs. Being a pragmatist at heart, I know that just talking about it will accomplish nothing. We must practice what we preach, for an old Chinese proverb says:

I hear and I forget;
I see and I remember;
I do and I understand.