BUILDING A CASE FOR THE CORE CURRICULUM IN AGRICULTURE

Paul E. Hemp
Teacher Education

University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign

In recent years, agricultural educators in some states have developed a core curriculum for a basic agricultural production program at the ninth and tenth grade levels. The core curriculum is not a state course of study, but it is based on the assumption that there is a common core of knowledges and skills in agriculture which all agriculture students, regardless of their specific occupational interests or goals, should master. A core curriculum in agriculture can include instructional units which are of specific interest to people in a local community. In some states, 70-80 percent of the instructional program at the ninth and tenth grade levels constitutes the "core". The remaining 20-30 percent of the instruction is selected from important agricultural areas specific to the local community or to the classes to be taught.

Traditional Approach

The core curriculum concept represents a strict departure from the traditional principles of course planning in vocational agriculture. In the past, most agricultural educators, including secondary teachers, teacher educators, and state supervisors, have advocated courses of study based on the agriculture in the local community. Curriculum development was seen as a local teacher activity designed to identify the knowledges and skills which students needed to prepare for farming or non-farm agricultural occupations in the local community. Beginning teachers were taught to survey the farms and non-farm agricultural businesses in their communities to identify problem areas and appropriate content to include in the instructional program. Thus, the courses of study for a particular school were to be "tailor made" for the community and the students who were to be enrolled.

Justification for a Core Curriculum

Is the locally-planned curriculum approach still the best way to design courses of study in agriculture? Should agricultural educators in a state develop a core curriculum in agriculture and promote its use throughout the state? A case for a core curriculum at the ninth and tenth grade levels could be developed from the following considerations:

1. The practices of basing agriculture courses of study entirely on local farm practice and preparing students for employment in the local community is no longer a

Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture
Volume 21, Number 3, pp.2-4
DOI: 10.5032/jaatea.1980.03002

defensible approach to curriculum development in vocational agriculture. Increased mobility of people and the rapidly changing nature of the agricultural industry suggests that a broader-based curriculum should be offered.

2. An increasing number of students enrolled in vocational agriculture programs have no farm experience which means that these students must be taught the basic agricultural production content that has previously been acquired by farm students at home. The school must teach that which was previously taught at home if it is to serve non-farm students.

3. A basic core of knowledges and skills in agriculture is useful and even necessary for gaining employment in most agricultural occupations. Researchers have identified these knowledges and skills for many occupational areas during recent years.

4. Students enrolled in high school agriculture programs need to be exposed to a wide variety of agriculture areas at the ninth and tenth grade levels. They need to acquire an understanding of the vast array of agricultural occupations in the United States and to learn the basic agriculture that is needed for specialized study at a later stage of the educational program.

5. Specialized courses in agriculture for high school students are inappropriate for most students at the ninth and tenth grade levels and perhaps even for some eleventh and twelfth grade students. Students are not selecting career options as early in life as they did 10-20 years ago. This delay in selecting an occupation or occupational cluster has been brought about by at least two factors. First, the number of career options in agriculture and outside of agriculture has increased tremendously in recent years. It is more difficult to select or even to become knowledgeable about the occupational possibilities. Second, many of the students currently enrolled in agriculture programs have little or no experience in agriculture and need more time to explore the vocational opportunities in the field.

6. A number of new and emerging developments in the field of education suggests that schools should use a different approach in curriculum development. In many states, programs of minimum competency are being planned which will require students to master certain basic competencies as a graduation requirement. If this concept is applied to vocational agriculture, someone will need to determine what the basic and important competencies in agriculture are and see to it that they are taught to all students.

7. Articulation between agricultural education programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels is hampered by the lack of uniformity in what is taught at the high school level. Community colleges and universities can not now assume that a student who has taken two to four years of high school agriculture is ready to move into courses designed for the college level. There is a great deal of slippage in moving students through the various levels of agricultural education.

8. The problem of preparing a sufficient number of competent agriculture teachers and keeping these teachers in the profession has been identified as the most crucial concern of the agricultural education profession. Beginning teachers of agriculture, many of whom lack farm background and experience, find it difficult to prepare themselves for the teaching assignments which they are given. It would be helpful to the future teacher to know what is generally taught in high school agriculture, especially at grades nine and ten so that he or she could select college courses and learning experiences which relate closely to the job to be performed.

Summary

Changes in the types of students enrolled in vocational agriculture and their interests, background, and needs suggest that agricultural educators should re-think the approaches currently used in curriculum development in vocational agriculture. The advantages of the core curriculum and the traditional approach to curriculum development need to be compared and weighed against the disadvantages. The final decision regarding future directions in curriculum development should be made jointly by teachers and state staff to arrive at a functional approach with options for change. In some states, a core curriculum for urban schools should be developed along with another core curriculum for schools in rural areas. A rigid, detailed course of study mandated by a state department or other group should be avoided. The core curriculum which includes provisions for teachers to incorporate problem areas of local importance and concern appears to be worthy of further development.

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