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"SOFT" MONEY IN EDUCATION

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In the last decade there has emerged a new way of doing business in many fields including education. Federal funds in the form of grants and contracts have been made available to state governments and institutions for conducting research, starting new programs and improving existing ones at a level never before known. Funds thus received are commonly known as "soft" money and are earmarked for specific purposes to be spent within an established period of time. Educators have found themselves in an entirely "new ballgame" from the old hard money days of support for their programs. This new process offers many opportunities for making one's hopes and dreams come true in a hurry, yet carries with it many frustrations and problems. The purpose of this article is to identify some opportunities and problems associated with soft money funding in the field of Agricultural Education and to offer some solutions to the problem.

It would appear that 1963 was the year in which much of the soft money movement (if it can be properly identified as a movement) began in the United States in Vocational Education. The 88th Congress included in the Vocational Education Act of 1963 opportunities for all fields of Vocational Education to submit program proposals for funding and subsequent action of the approved project authors. In many Agricultural Teacher Education Departments, long-time needs and dreams at long last had come true. Many of us added new staff including graduate assistants, secured stenographic help, artists and other workers, and often purchased equipment to supplement that available in the Department.

For several years the major source of these "soft money" program opportunities was from the federal level. Gradually, the major source of these funds shifted to the states and is currently known as a type of revenue sharing by the U.S. Government.

The many accomplishments and good works achieved from this "mana from heaven" is well known. Every state points with pride at their accomplishments. In some states, curriculum guides in gread detail have been developed for traditional and emerging agricultural occupations. Many states started pilot programs with "seed" (soft) money in new agricultural occupation areas such as Turfgrass, Natural Resources, Ornamental Horticulture, Forestry, Small Animal Management, to name but a few. After two or three years, the seed money was reduced or withdrawn entirely with the local school absorbing all costs for continuing programs.

Teacher educators since 1963 have devoted an increasing percent of their time to preparing proposals and administering those approved and funded. Through this experience, one has learned many of the joys and frustrations of administering a teacher education department financed with both hard and soft dollars.

Let us now look at some of the frustrations which often accompanies the administering of soft money activities in teacher education. Some solutions to specific problems are suggested.

1. <u>Transferring Tenured or Permanent Staff Salaries to Soft Money Projects</u>

   At the start of a project, the wise administrator should be a pessimist and should be sure that when the project ends permanent staff can "retreat" to the hard money portion of the department's budget with ease. This usually takes planning and careful watching. Opportunities to be "bailed out" of financial trouble in Universities is becoming harder to achieve.

2. <u>Adding Work to Already Busy Staff</u>

   If the project is to succeed, personnel must be assigned with time to do the job. This may require employing temporary staff for absorbing some of the work of tenured permanent staff. Often duties of permanent staff can be temporarily shifted to graduate assistants. Often regular work can be postponed to a later time.

3. <u>Establishing Goals Impossible to Achieve</u>

   Sound thinking and good common sense should govern one's deliberations when planning proposals for soft money support. It is better to have "overkill" results on a model project than to fall short in achieving the lofty goals and objectives of a too ambitious project.

4. <u>The Folly of Expecting Supplementary Funding and Time Extensions</u>

   Many of us have experienced frustration and disappointment when requests for supplementary funding to complete soft money projects were turned down. The solution here of course is to thoroughly and realistically plan each proposal submitted for funding. Extension of the completion date without supplementary funding is often possible.

5. Failure to Make Adequate Use of Advisory Committees

Most well chosen advisory committees are more than willing to advise project leaders when asked. Their advice will often prevent activities from becoming unrealistic or may prevent outright failure. Many projects lead into unfamiliar areas where the advice of experts can be very helpful.

6. Proposals that Reinvent the Wheel

Although some replication of research is good, to knowingly conduct studies which have been done many times by others is a waste of funds and manpower. Today one has available several sources of information which list previous work on topics and can be secured with ease. Some of the sources are: CRIS (Current Research Information System, U.S.D.A.), ERIC and Summaries of Studies in Agricultural Education.

7. Unrealistic Budgets

Experience soon teaches one to carefully plan the budget phase of projects submitted for financial support. If insufficient funds are requested, scarce funds within the department might have to be used to complete the project. The use of financial personnel in colleges and universities in reviewing proposed budgets will usually help one to prepare a realistic budget which fits the project.

8. Soft Money in Revenue Sharing Can Be a Mirage

One of the dangers of giving federal dollars for education to the states (revenue sharing) which are not designated for specific uses, matched by state funds or not, is that often the funds are allocated to priorities of biased state officials and not necessarily to needed vocational education programs. This process of local control of federal funds by Congress is to be commended; however, a governor, state secretary of education or state director of vocational education often channels the funds to the needs of their priorities which often may be far removed from the needs of vocational education in agriculture.

The above includes only some of the more common frustrations one encounters today in administering and supervising educational programs or projects with "soft" money financing. Seems like the soft money way of doing business will be with us for many years to come. More and more hard money budgets are being replaced by soft money budgets. Such is life! Are you thinking, too, of retiring soon?